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Fueling healthy, hungry bodies

Proper nutrition is key to a student's success

• BY DAILY PRESS STAFF

SMMUSD HDQTRS Jerome Maxwell is a nutritionist's nightmare.

The soon-to-be sophomore at Santa Monica High School is surrounded by healthy choices at school now that district officials are phasing in new calorie and fat restrictions approved by state Legislators.

But instead of picking up a Chinese chicken salad or a juice made from 100 percent fruit, Maxwell, like many of his classmates, quiets the growl in his stomach with pizza, French fries and sodas containing a high concentration of sugar.

What may be the worst thing about that is Maxwell knows what he is eating isn't healthy, but he goes for it anyway.

"They have salads and stuff, but it's too expensive, and it doesn't taste as good," Maxwell said, adding that he generally avoids the more nutritious selections and heads for pizza or chili cheese Fritos. "It's good, but it's not healthy."

As kids head back to school, parents may be wondering how to keep their children fit and eating healthy. Schools are making it easier, especially in Santa Monica where the "Farmers' Market Fresh Fruit and Salad Bar Program" is now in its 10th year, but for the most part, parents are on their own, forced to rely on the knowledge they picked up from their own parents or through reading articles focused on child nutrition.

"It can be tough getting your kids to eat better, especially if you haven't been setting a good example," said Karen Cohen, a certified nutritionist with a private practice in Westwood. "Parents need to be the role model for their children when it comes to their eating habits. Instead of lecturing them, get them involved in going to the supermarket, meal planning, buying the foods and then show them the connection between good food and good health."

Growing boys need about 3,000 calories per day while girls need around 2,400. That's a lot, but it's not just about meeting the requirement. A parent has to make sure the calories their children are taking in are quality calories and not just junk.

That means no fast-food cheeseburgers or greasy pizzas. Trying to pry a teen away from a McDonald's or a KFC may sound tough, but Cohen said parents can be successful if they keep the focus on one's health, and she's not talking about the dangers of clogged arteries. More like the embarrassment of clogged pores.

"A teen's body is growing through so many changes that it seems like every week there is something new to deal with," Cohen said. "Parents need to connect the two and use that in speaking

about how food helps them grow and affects their bodies. Someone who is concerned about their skin should try eating essential fatty acids that help the skin look smoother. Parents can suggest eating salmon, tuna or avocado."

When it comes to eating at home, parents should sit down with their children and share a meal. That means breakfast. Oftentimes families skip this most important meal. Cohen says that's a bad move, leaving kids drained of energy when they walk into school in the morning.

"You've got to replenish yourself and that means eating a balanced breakfast with carbohydrates and protein," Cohen said. "A good example is yogurt with granola, sliced apples, scrambled eggs and orange juice with calcium. Whole wheat waffles are good with fruit."

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Karen Cohen,
nutritionist

For lunch, Cohen said a parent can select a whole-wheat hot-dog bun, spread some peanut butter and jelly on the inside and then pack it with a banana covered in chopped peanuts and raisins.

"It's a nutritious lunch that is different, very cute and fun for the kids to put together," she said.

In the end, it really is about the lessons learned at home.

"You can't expect your kids to eat healthy if you don't," Cohen said. "You need to make the kid feel as if they have a hand in this, that they have a choice of what they want to eat. Get them involved and have them try new things. Make it fun."

Once you've figured out what the little ones want, put as much energy into finding appealing and functional ways of packing it.

Let your children help select their lunch boxes. Many lunch box companies now sell models intended to be customized, either with craft supplies or professional monogramming done when they are ordered.

The food itself can be fun too. Some parents like to pack lunches with themes.

For "zoology," cut your child's sandwich with a lion or bear



FABIAN LEWKOWICZ FABIANL@SMDP.COM

Eating right at school is a learning experience all its own.

cookie cutter. Add "bugs" on a log (cream cheese filled celery with raisins on top) and decorate a banana with monkey stickers.

For younger kids, it may be good to keep a stockpile of comic strips, riddles, jokes and Mad Libs, and include them with the lunch.

It sounds like a lot of extra work, but it doesn't have to be.

"Get organized. A little bit of effort on the weekend can save you a lot of stress," said Kit Bennett, founder of the family advice site AmazingMoms.com. "Keep everything in one place so you aren't running around in the morning looking for things." •

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