

Family Meals Focus

The Ellyn Satter Institute Newsletter

Nurturing Children at School

by Ellyn Satter, MS, MSSW, Dietitian and Family Therapist

We are fortunate to have the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), although I acknowledge that you may have your reservations. I regret the low-fat, low-sodium, and yes, low-calorie policies because lunches aren't as good tasting as in the past, and the children who need them the most aren't as likely to get enough to eat. However, NSLP sees to it that children get nutritious meals. Most schools currently offer free meals to all students, including breakfast and lunches, and some even provide evening meals. We need NSLP and it does a lot of good, so let's consider what we each can do in order to nurture our children with school meals.

School lunch supports you in providing for your child

In depending on school meals you are providing for your child. You are making positive use of community resources to see to it that your child's needs are met. You do not need to apologize. In fact, you can help your child by finding positive ways to think and do that will allow them to feel truly nurtured by the program.

Treat the school nutrition program with respect

We all have our food traditions and values, prefer them, and feel strongly about them. School nutrition programs are a popular target for criticism. However, your child depends on school meals to get fed. When we criticize or disdain the food they depend on, children feel ashamed of eating it and liking it. You need not worry that school food will undermine your family foodways. At home, you are entitled to follow your convictions and preferences, and your child will learn to eat and prefer the foods you enjoy.

Assume your child will cope with the food

School nutrition personnel do not do sadistic feeding. They like children and are kind to them. They greet them. They offer choices. When they introduce a new food, they also offer a familiar and generally liked food. They make a bread-type food available so your child can eat that if all else fails. They take no for an answer. They do not insist your child eat everything on their tray. Go to bat for your child if your school nutrition program fails in any of these areas. Search *Comfortable Cafeterias* to see a video of a school cafeteria that brilliantly follows the Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding.

Understand normal child eating behavior

Children eat erratically. Some days they eat a lot, other days they eat only a little. Some days they eat some of everything that is put in front of them; other days they eat only one or two foods. Some days they *love* a particular food; other days they ignore that food completely. They eat what tastes good to them on a given day at a given meal. They don't eat a food because they have been taught that it is good for them. They can parrot their nutrition lessons, but they only *eat* what *tastes* good, and that varies from one day to the next.

Reassure your child they don't have to eat

If you have a family rule that your child must eat all of everything that is put before them—or even has to taste it—your child will be afraid of the school nutrition program. They will assume that the same rules apply at school as at home, and they will worry about not being able to eat the unknown foods offered by the unfamiliar people in the great big cafeteria. While you are at it, reassure your child that they can eat only part of a meal and that every meal will have something that they can eat.

Assume your child will learn and grow

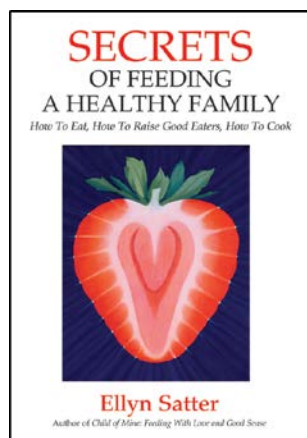
Children always do better if they have an out. Your reassurance that they don't have to eat if they don't want to will help your child to push forward and learn to eat the unfamiliar food in the cafeteria. They will learn to manage foods you don't have at home and to respect foodways that are different from yours.

Minimize the negative

Help your child cope with a less-than-filling school lunch by offering them a good breakfast that contains protein, fat, and carbohydrate. Provide them with a substantial after-school snack that does the same. Guard against your child's developing a heightened appetite for forbidden foods (e.g. high-fat, high-sugar foods) by making them a routine part of family meals and snacks.

Eat at school occasionally

Join your child for an occasional school meal. Eating at school gives your blessings to the school nutrition program. Your child will experience those blessings when they eat there. Nothing gives your blessings more strongly than your enjoying the food and the lunch-room sociability with your child.



Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family* says the secret of raising a healthy eater is to love good food, enjoy eating, and share that love and enjoyment with your child. When the joy goes out of eating, nutrition suffers.