I remember the summer my daughter turned eight years old and we as a family decided the best child care for the summer would be “attendants” at home to supervise her, accompany her on her bike to activities, and prepare noon meals and snacks. We had two different teen-age “attendants” who came on different days who provided me with my own independent study on how different teenagers view food and how they vary in their ability to prepare it! I asked each to give me their grocery list at least two days ahead so that I could accept or reject the menu and purchase the approved items. Through the experience my daughter either prepared and consumed creative, nutritious lunches and snacks or ate processed, microwaved foods which represented the full repertoire of one of the girl’s idea on appropriate meal choices.

I realized that these skills are not being taught in all homes and asked myself where are young people supposed to learn about food and meal preparation? After that summer I knew that I, as a parent had the responsibility to teach my child how to choose and prepare nutritious food. With the elimination of many family and consumer sciences programs from schools, the responsibility rests even more fully on the parents and caregivers of children. This can be a fun learning experience for all involved if approached in that light. How can a parent begin?

It is my goal as a Family and Consumer Sciences Agent in Florida to have on every refrigerator in this area a MyPyramid poster. This serves as a reminder of the need for foods from all the food groups. Because the triangle is smaller on the top, it reminds us that the “nutrient dense” foods are closer to the bottom and the “sometimes foods”, those with more fat and sugar, are close to the top and need to be eaten sparingly. The colored sections represent our need for a variety of foods from all sections and the size of the sections indicates that not all foods are needed in equal quantities.

To manage meals with family members involved, a posted grocery list is needed and everyone must take the responsibility of adding to the list. If you are the coordinator of food purchases, you assume the right to edit the grocery list. Six packages of assorted potato chips listed may not be the wisest nutritional decision! One of the greatest things we can do as parents is model good behavior. Snacking is one area where children are watching us.

With children’s high energy level, it can be difficult for them to get enough nutrition in three meals each day. Snacking can be an important way for children to get all of the nutrients they need. Unfortunately, many children think of chips or cookies when they want a snack and these foods are often low in nutrients. For children to benefit from the extra nutrition snacks can provide, it should be a mini-meal with healthful foods.

It can be difficult for us to change the way a child thinks about snacks. Children who are used to eating chips every afternoon will not want to switch to celery sticks and peanut butter right away. Remember to help children learn to like healthy snacks; we must give them healthy snacks.

It was suggested in the UF/IFAS Expanded Food and Nutrition Program curriculum that you might play the alphabet game. Each day of the summer offer a nutritious snack which begins with a letter of the alphabet from A to Z. For example, serve Almonds, a Bagel, Carrots, Dried fruit, an Egg, Figs, Graham crackers, a Ham slice, Ice cream, Jack cheese, Kiwi fruit, Lettuce, Milk, a Nectarine, Oatmeal, Pudding, a nutritionally-filled Quesadilla, Radishes, a Spinach leaf roll-up, a Tomato, Ugli fruit, a Valencia orange, Walnuts, Yogurt and Zwieback. (Yes I missed “x”; can you offer any suggestions?) When you have gone through the alphabet and have summer days remaining, have your children pick the letters to repeat and find a different nutritious snack that starts with the letters requested.
Remember nutritious snacking is planned snacking. Summertime is an excellent time to make some creative changes.

If you have a question, write to Shelley Swenson, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida Extension--Wakulla County, 84 Cedar Avenue, Crawfordville, FL 32327-2063; or call the Extension Office 926-3931, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

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