

Healthy snacks, mini meals: Balanced nutrition for kids

Snacks, the healthy ones, can help kids focus and keep their energy up

By Bailey Koch, RD, CSP, LD and Kathleen Zelman, RDN

Kathleen: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Nutrition for Kids podcast. I am Kathleen Zelman, a registered dietitian nutritionist, and I'm your host. And today we have a great guest with us. We have Bailey Koch, who is a registered dietitian and also a member of our Nutrition for Kids Advisory Board. And Bailey is a board certified specialist in pediatric nutrition.

She's practiced for 20 years. 17 of them have been in private practice and she especially focuses on pediatric gastroenterology. She's a founding member of the Nutrition Council for Pediatric Nutrition Professionals and currently serves as the clinical practice chair. She's also a member of the Medical Advisory Board for both the foundation and for nutrition for Kids, as I said before.

So we are really excited to have such an expert with us today. So welcome Bailey.

Bailey: Thanks for having me, Kathleen.

Kathleen: Oh, it's my pleasure. Well, I [00:01:00] thought that today what we'd talk about is, you know, here in Georgia, kids are going back to school. I know it's shocking to people who live around the country, but our kids, most of our kids are starting August 6th, so parents are getting ready for school.

And as parents, you know, we wanna know, as parents, we do know the importance of good nutrition and making sure our kids get enough sleep and regular physical activity. But a lot of us are challenged when it comes time to providing those nutritious snacks, packing lunches, that kids are not gonna trade away.

And it's a real conundrum when you go to the grocery store and you see all these processed snacks and you wonder, well, that says it has vegetables in it. Is that really good? So parents are confused, and I hope today you can really enlighten us as to, let's kick off with why are snacks so important for kids?

Bailey: So one of the things that I always focus on with families I work with [00:02:00] is making sure that the food that they consume is gonna be filling food. So that they can keep, you know, self-regulation for portion control also will help, you know, if they're consuming things that are digested very quickly, then they're, you know, gonna bottom out that's gonna affect their blood

sugar and ultimately that will affect their focus in school as well as their energy throughout the day.

And. You know, making it through the school day. So making sure that we've always got some good protein paired with some fiber. Every time you pack a snack is gonna achieve that goal.

Kathleen: Good. So I always call them mini meals because even though they might be between the major meals, if you think about 'em as a mini meal, then it helps you think less treat and more sustenance like you say, because the bottom out.

What are the kinds of foods that cause kids to bottom out? So all of [00:03:00] the simple sugars, mm-hmm.

Bailey: The highly processed foods that really are just empty calories. They don't have any protein, they don't have any fat, they don't have any fiber. Um, they really don't have a lot of nutrients at all. So. They're just fillers.

So I love that you said that, you know, you really do more mini meals. I totally agree with that. Um, and I think that helps parents to also think about healthier snacks as well, because it's, you know, when we think about a meal, it's more of our, you know, fruits or vegetables with our whole grains and our protein, and that's exactly what we wanna do at snacks, just on a smaller scale.

Kathleen: So what are some of your favorites or some of your clients that have had that aha moment? Like, oh, popcorn, that'd be a good snack. Or, you know, some of the other kinds that, you know, popcorn's a whole grain and you know, you don't have to load it with all kinds of additives. You can just keep it simple.

But what are some other recommendations that you'd like to provide for [00:04:00] us?

Bailey: So popcorn is a great one, but we would need to put a little bit of protein with it. So again, it holds them until the next time, you know, until they're school lunch or even after school or until dinner. In some cases. I like the cheese whip crackers as well as the moon cheese crackers.

They're basically baked cheese, so they're crunchy and have a little bit of that saltiness that kids often are kind of craving in a snack time, but they're just cheese, so they're straight protein. And then you can send that with some, you

know, triscuit crackers, pair it with that, or you could send it with the popcorn to get in some fiber.

Um, I usually tell parents, look for three or more grams of fiber. On their grains. That lets you know it's a pretty decent source. If you do the cheese wisps or the moon cheese, then you could do fruit with that as well. Mm-hmm. Obviously fruit with a string cheese or fruit with a yogurt, you do have to be careful of the yogurt pouches, the yogurt tubes.

A lot of those really don't have a lot of substance, so [00:05:00] paying attention to the amount of protein in those. Is gonna be important as well as the serving size too. So Siggis, Chobani, even like the Kroger brand and the target brand of some of the pouch yogurts are actually um Okay. As well.

Kathleen: Pretty good. So you're looking for.

You mentioned three grams of, uh, fiber. Yes. So are, is there a certain number of protein grams that you'd like to see per serving?

Bailey: So, I, I would like to see at least five grams, but it also depends a little bit on the age of the child. And so the problem with the, mainly the tubes is they are a much smaller serving size.

So I used to give like a set amount of protein, but. So many of the tubes were automatically out 'cause they were a smaller amount. So I now I say look for about one and a half grams of protein per ounce. Okay. One to one and a half. And that gives [00:06:00] you a pretty good amount for that little snack. I. At least for the yogurt, the yogurt tubes.

'cause the Chobani tubes are actually a lot smaller, so, and they're a good option. They do have protein in them.

Kathleen: How about the refrigeration? I mean, if your kids get, at least the younger kids in elementary school, they do bring snacks to school. Yes. So is that, uh, safety concern?

Bailey: Well, so the, the tubes, um, can be frozen, so Oh, perfect.

Yes. So you would take it out that morning and then it would be thawed, you know, but still cold by snack time. Yeah, usually perfect. The pouches, I mean, so many of the lunch boxes have where you can add a ice pack to it, and that would keep it cold, so otherwise you're right. Yeah, no, it would not be good.

Warm. It probably wouldn't taste good. Yeah. So I wouldn't do that. But usually an ice pack or if you do the tubes frozen and your should be good dried fruit. Is another great option.

Kathleen: How [00:07:00] about some kind of a trail mix? What do you think about nuts for kids?

Bailey: I typically, you'll have, uh, families make their own versus buying it.

So you can, you know, trader Joe's target most grocery stores. You can buy the individual nuts that the child likes. Along with, um, like some dark chocolate chips and the free, uh, either freeze dried or dried fruit, uh, that they also like. And that way, you know, I feel like a lot of the mixes, whenever I buy it, it's almost all peanuts and then a little bit of the other varieties in there.

So I like to make my own.

Kathleen: Do you have any concerns about nuts in kids? Is there any, I mean, mm-Hmm. I know there's a peanut allergy if, if you might go to a school where a child does have one and you can't bring that into the classroom. But other than that, any concerns about nuts in kids?

Bailey: No, just if they're too young, if it's a choking hazard.

So I'd say like under the age of three, I wouldn't, yeah, wouldn't recommend that. But for school age kids, they [00:08:00] should be fine. The only issue would be if it's a nut free school. Um, and some of them are, yeah, a lot of other schools may just have like a nut free classroom, but the whole school is not nut free.

Kathleen: Well, Bailey, why are snacks so important for kids? Why do they need them? So

Bailey: again, if they're going, you know, elementary kids are usually eating breakfast around six 15, yeah, six 30 in the morning,

Kathleen: really early,

Bailey: really early. And then, you know, they may not have lunch until 11 or 12. So they're going long periods without having a meal.

And if. If that happens, then again, kind of back to what I was saying, they don't have any in reserves. They, they need a little boost, you know, in, in

between. I usually encourage, you know, kids to try to eat every three to four hours so that you can get ahead of that, um, hunger. Curve, I guess if you, that's what you wanna call it.

Um, [00:09:00] and then they're not starving. I don't ever want kids to feel like they are starving because that's, that tends to be when, um, kids are going to. Overeat and not make the best choices, and not just kids, all of us.

Kathleen: Mm-hmm. That's what

Bailey: we do. So eating every three to four hours and then making sure you've got that good protein paired with the fiber to sustain you for three to four hours is really the best approach in, in my opinion.

And again, going back, it also is gonna help keep them, you know, focused. But even your, your older kids that may be having breakfast a little bit later, they're having a later lunch. Mm-Hmm. And then they're not getting home until five o'clock in the afternoon. And if that, they may have activities. Um, that they have to go to directly to, so it could be, you know, 12 o'clock they're having lunch and then they can't have dinner until eight.

So again, especially if they have extracurricular activities after school, they've gotta have something midway between in order to, to keep their energy levels up and be able [00:10:00] to do the best that they can do in those after school activities as well.

Kathleen: Absolutely. And they're growing. I mean, they, yes, they have all these nutritional needs that need to be met and Right.

You know, depending on the age, it's hard for kids to meet their nutritional needs in three meals a day. Yes. So that's why you should think of those. Think of snacks as many meals that they're trying to get them to eat more healthfully. Right. Versus just filling calories. Exactly, because that's no problem.

Usually not in this country. Mm-hmm. But I mean, we're always trying to get kids to eat more fruits and vegetables. At every setting you should have, half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables according to the dietary guidelines. But there's a lot of kids out there, most kids that don't want anything green to pass their lips.

So what tips do you have for parents to get kids to enjoy the ants on a log, which is the peanut butter and the raisins on a, a little piece of celery, or, you

know, eat some carrots and dip it in some hummus. Like how do we get [00:11:00] kids to just find. The acceptability of more nutritious snacks. So,

Bailey: million dollar

Kathleen: question.

Bailey: Yeah. Right. Um, I know I always, I wish I had a wine that I could wave. Yeah. Some kids just won't do it. Um, and I find a lot of kids, or the majority of the kids, they either love fruit and. Don't care for veggies as much or it's the opposite. So I've got one of each. So, um, but you know, having set snack times versus just an open-ended, you can go get something whenever you want, um, is a good place to start.

Um, and then, you know, really starting from. The time they start eating and developing these, these habits and mm-hmm. You know, that this is, this is what the day looks like when it comes to feeding and meals. Um, outside of the snack times. I mean, I don't ever wanna deny kids food. 'cause like you said, they're growing.

Um, but in some cases, if they're empty, if they're eating all [00:12:00] these empty calories, um, then they're, they're gonna be hungry all afternoon or all morning, all day. Um, so. I usually employ the kind of rule of thumb that anything outside of a set snack time would be veggies. Um, and it works really well with kids because when, and even with um, you know, meals, seconds are always veggies.

Those are our fillers. You can never have too many veggies. So it's a pretty easy thing to be able to tell kids. Um. Y you know, you already had your snack. It's not dinnertime yet, but if you're hungry, then we can, you know, we can never have too many veggies. They're high in fiber, they're low in calories, full of nutrients.

Um, so you can never have too many of them. And usually that'll, that'll fill them up if they are hungry and they agree to eat them, or if they turn their nose up and say they do not want. You know [00:13:00] what you're offering. Well then they probably weren't that hungry to begin with. So in my opinion, it's a kind of a win-win situation.

They either eat the veggies or they decide they're not going to, and then they wait and then go occupy themselves doing something else. But just like you mentioned, like pairing 'em with some sort of dip.

Kathleen: Yeah.

Bailey: A lot of my sensory kids that have sensory aversion. They prefer raw veggies or freeze dried veggies because of the crunch.

It's also a less significant flavor as well. Um, the mushy kids tend to our sensory kids. They don't really like that. So, um, starting with a freeze dried or raw, um, typically is going to have you be more successful. Um, dips like hummus, guacamole. Um, there, there are some yogurt, spinach dips that are great.

Um, nut butters as well. Um, and if kids like any of those things, then they will often use, instead of a chip [00:14:00] or a cracker, they would be willing to dip. The, you know, carrot sticks or celery sticks in there. Um, and then also kind of thinking outside of the box, what do you usually when you go to a party, what's on a veggie tray?

A lot of different items. It's not just celery and carrots. You've got cucumbers, um, bell peppers, sweet bell peppers, um, you know, cut up squash and zucchini, um, and cutting 'em into chips or even like sticks versus, you know, here's a bell pepper to eat.

Kathleen: Right. A lot of

Bailey: times that that alone will also encourage 'em the presentation.

Kathleen: Yeah, for sure. But do you find that there are particular vegetables that, you know, if, if I'm a mom that has a kid that he's just absolutely refusing any vegetables, is it something like a hickma or, or a strip of red bell pepper? I, I love your recommendation to like cut 'em up and present them in an edible form, but which ones do you find, uh, tend to be the [00:15:00] most accepted?

Um,

Bailey: it, there's really not, I get that question all the time, and there's really not a huge preference. They tend to either love or hate certain vegetables, but if I were to say the ones that are going to be the most successful, the Sweet Bell peppers, cut into strips is probably the most common, and then maybe cucumbers after that and cutting the cucumbers either in.

Sticks or slicing and then removing the seeds and turning them into like half moons. 'cause a lot of times the reason kids don't like the cucumber is because they don't like the seeds. They don't like the middle part of it. So when you get rid of that, then they will oftentimes eat it. So, but bell peppers and cucumbers are probably gonna be the most.

Successful. Actually, you know what, kale chips. Some kids really like kale chips and they're pretty easy. I've never made them, but they are pretty easy to, they're a cinch

Kathleen: Yeah. To

Bailey: make. Yeah.

Kathleen: Well, but I'm excited about what you said about freeze dried, because I'm just not [00:16:00] familiar with freeze dried vegetables.

So are they commonly found? Do you do 'em yourself? How do you explore that option? So

Bailey: you can find a variety of them, um, in the grocery store, so, hmm. Um, and not every grocery store carries them, but, um, I would say probably Trader Joe's, um, a good, like a super target are gonna have the most variety of your freeze dried veggies.

Oh, that's great. Yeah, I love that. Sometimes I'll see in Publix, um, where they, they have their own like nuts and seeds and dried fruits packaged in the produce section. I will see some freeze dried veggies in that section at Publix.

Kathleen: So they're not in the freezer department, they'll, they're gonna be shelf stable, right?

Well, they're shelf stable and they're crunchy and dry. Oh, I can't wait to try some. Yeah. All right. So if I as a mom have tried everything and I'm just banging my head against a wall, is it okay to substitute fruit for vegetables?
[00:17:00]

Bailey: That's another loaded question. So fruit is also high in fiber and filling if you're actually eating the fruit.

And you know, of course loaded with nutrients, but it's a natural source of sugar much more so than veggies. So if you think like 25 calories, a serving for veggies versus 60 calories a serving for fruit, um, it's not an even trade and. You know, I run into that a lot with kids I work with on weight management where it's just an endless amount of fruit and so kids are, yeah, it's better than chips and you know, other junk, but you still can have too much of it.

So if I've got a, a family and the kid really is picky about fruits and veggies. Then if they're willing to eat one or the other between meals, then go for it. Um, because I know they're not [00:18:00] gonna end up over consuming

'cause they really don't like any of it. Um, but if I've got a child that really likes fruit and they've had, you know, an endless, you know, supply and that's maybe part of the.

The issue, um, then no. I would say, you know, we have our fruit with our meals or our snacks, and then seconds would be veggies. Um, but I'll give them like, don't go over, you know, maybe having three or four fruits a day, you know, something along. Again, it depends on the, the situation and the, the age of the child, but it's definitely not an even swap

Kathleen: and worst case scenario, is it okay to just take a once daily multivitamin to fill in these nutrient gaps?

Bailey: It's not the same. Another loaded question. Yeah, it's, it's not the same. So, no, I mean, do I recommend vitamins for kids? In some cases, yes. If I've got a really, really picky eater, or I've got a kid with a sensory aversion that's in feeding therapy, um, I [00:19:00] mean, there's definitely a place for them. Um, but it is not the same as getting it from the food that they're eating.

Um, and it's not, again, back to the, it's, it's not gonna fill them up. So. Uh, they have a place, but it, it's not the same. You don't get the fiber, the fiber gummies are, it's not that you can just go add a fiber gummy with the multivitamin and call it a day. It's, it, it also, it takes time to eat these fruits and veggies, which helps with, you know, them feeling satiated.

So they definitely have a place, but it's not the same. Yep.

Kathleen: That's why they call 'em supplements. It's meant to supplement, not take the place of. Bailey, how about the kids? Like we often see that just absolutely crave sugar and that's all they want are sweets. I mean, I loved your point earlier about it starts, you know, you as parents, you gotta start educating them or providing them with these healthy options when they're very young.

But [00:20:00] let's say now I have a third grader and they are a sweet hound. How do I break that?

Bailey: So I always look at drinks first. If you're, you know, the more you provide these simple sugars, the more you have them available. The more they're gonna continue to consume them and the more they're gonna crave them.

Um, so starting to cut back, you know, for example, don't, just don't buy the juice, the sugary drinks. That is, in my opinion, the worst thing you could do.

Um, so just don't, don't have 'em in the house. We're not gonna do that. Um, and then once they get used to that change. Um, then, and, and while they're getting used to that, start paying attention to the types of snacks that you're buying.

Fruit snacks, even though they say a hundred percent fruit, they're not filling. Right. And I mean, really when you open up a package of those, I feel like I'm getting, you know, shortchanged every time it's like five gummies and it's 125 calories. [00:21:00] Mm-Hmm. And I want another one. Mm-Hmm. So it's. It's terrible.

But you can take, um, dried fruit. I used to do this with, with mine when they were little. I would get like dried apricots or whatever, you know, whatever I could pick up. And then I'd get my kitchen scissors, cut it into small, cut 'em into small little pieces and put 'em in a baggie. And there's your gummies.

So,

Kathleen: um, good ones.

Bailey: Yeah. But then, you know, as you're getting rid of the juices and the other sugary drinks, you're starting to change up, um, some of the types of snacks that you're buying. Looking for ones that are very similar to what they like, but have the protein and the fiber in them. So like the granola bars, instead of buying, you know, just the chewy granola bars that are, again, they say low sugar or low.

Um, calories, but they don't have any other substance in them. So looking for another granola bar that's very similar but has the protein in the fiber, [00:22:00] that'll help fill them up. And then you phase the other ones out. Um, you know, that's, and it can be a gradual. Transition. Um, the other thing is, you know, a lot of people think that dessert is part of dinner.

We get dessert every day. No. Mm-Hmm. It's not, it's a treat. It should be considered a treat. So if they're having this every day, then a good place to start is, okay, we're gonna go to every other day. And now that this, you know, school is back in session, it's good to say, okay. This is what we're gonna do this school year.

This is how this is gonna work. New roles. Um, so it's a good time to make that change too. But you know, once they get used to every other day, um, then you could go to, every two days we do a treat. Um, you know, and you can always. You know, help by offering like fresh cut fruit instead of the ice cream bowl that they're used to having or the cookie.

Um, and that will also help, [00:23:00] but you're really trying to get them out of the habit of expecting something sweet every night after dinner. And what I find is as you kind of gradually make these changes. Kids eventually stop asking and expecting for it too. So once we get to that point, then I will tell parents, well, I wouldn't, you know, even if you're at every other day, if the child doesn't ask for it.

Then don't offer it.

Kathleen: Yeah.

Bailey: Oh, I love your advice. It's really helpful. Yeah. I mean, that's really what you're looking for. You don't want them Mm-Hmm. To crave it every

Kathleen: day. That's the whole point. Break those cravings and routines help. Certainly with school, that's a new routine. Mm-Hmm. You know, I love that you mentioned the fruit snacks or the veggie straws, like no, those are not vegetables.

No. Um, you know, they might be better than something else on the shelf, but parents really need to look at the labels so, you know, you've, you've given them some really good guidelines in terms of what to look [00:24:00] for. And, you know, maybe the treats are best left as a treat outside the house. We go out and get ice cream or we, what we have in the house are the things that are good for you.

So I love it. I, I. Great, great advice. I often

Bailey: tell parents like ice cream, just don't keep it in the house. Go out. That's your treat for the week. Yeah. 'cause if it's in the house, it's gonna be a constant battle with a kid that has had it every day of their life. No, you can't have it tonight. No. I mean, do you really wanna have that battle every day?

If it's there, you're going to for a little while.

Kathleen: Right. But I think the advice about the slow transition in developing these new routines, I mean. Parents have to just take ownership of this and it's gonna be hard initially, but yet you'll get to that finish line and they'll ultimately, like you said, they'll stop asking for it.

So. Alright, Bailey, fabulous advice. I'm so inspired, but one last question before I let you go. So parents are often, they, they have to have things like even little [00:25:00] preschoolers. They need to bring a snack. And so they're used to buying things that are individually packaged and those tend to be

highly processed, full of sugar, full of salt, full of preservatives, not the kinds of things you're advocating.

So what advice do you have for parents that as they start these new routines, like what should they do? Package up their popcorn, you know, or how should they overcome the desire to have the convenience and really go for the healthier approach?

Bailey: Well, I mean, there's really two easy ways. One is there are some pre-packaged like popcorn, um, in, and, and the moon cheese that I mentioned, and the cheese whip even in individually sized, um, packages.

And some, you know, some protein bars, some dried fruit, some freeze dried fruit. Um, those things do come in individually packaged. Um. Serving sizes, but you have to look. They're not as, uh. As [00:26:00] available as the big, huge boxes of chips, that sort of thing. But the other thing is, if you just do a little bit of pre-planning, do your grocery shopping on the weekend and get the kids involved.

Show them what you know, obviously age dependent, but tell them what they need to be looking for at the grocery store. Make it almost like a scavenger hunt. Okay, well you know what These, you know, instead of the kids asking, can we have this? Well, I don't know. Let's look at the label. Ah, okay. So it's not gonna be that filling, but let's find an alternative that is, look for that fiber, look for the protein, and then look at the ingredients and the added sugars after that.

So you know, you've got something of substance. Um, and then, you know, once you get home, anything like your veggies, your fruits, um, depending, like cheese, anything that has to be. Individually portioned. Go ahead and do it for the week. Put it in in, um, serving sizes in [00:27:00] individual baggies in your refrigerator or in your pantry and already paired up.

And that way during the week when things get so crazy, I. It's easy to grab. It doesn't take extra time because that is probably the biggest complaint parents have is there's just not enough time in the day. And at the end of the day, I really just need something easy that they can grab or parents working from home.

I just need something easy. But if you have, you know, your, your pantry set up or your refrigerator is set up where everything's already proportioned, um, in the correct serving size paired up, then it's easy for them to go and and grab something quickly.

Kathleen: Absolutely great advice. And also like things like those little mandarin oranges, I saw my little three-year-old granddaughter, P one all by herself.

So even the little kids can do that kind of thing and handle it and they're proud of themselves and you know how wonderful that they can. Something like that. And that's great

Bailey: also for, for kids that have sensory issues to be able, um, and, and or, um. Like, uh, skill [00:28:00] delays being, you know, it's good for their fine motor skills.

So, you know, it's just not, feeding is not always. Just about feeding. There's a lot that goes into it. And, um, kids that are maybe a little more challenged in some of these areas, it's really helpful for them to be able to do some of these things. And kids do, they get excited about it, so. Get 'em as involved

Kathleen: as you can.

I love it. Let them help you pack up those snacks and pick 'em out at the grocery store. And you know, it's like they say when kids grow vegetables, they're more inclined to eat them when they've had some involvement in the process. So getting 'em involved will help satisfy this challenge of feeding kids healthy snacks.

Bailey, this was wonderful. As kids get back to school, I think now the parents are. Equipped with all kinds of great tips to really help make this school year be a great one. So thank you so much for joining us today.

Bailey: Yeah, thanks for having [00:29:00] me.