

# Healthy Celebrations

## Promoting a Healthy School Environment



Birthday parties and holiday celebrations at school provide a unique opportunity to help make healthful eating fun and exciting for children. Schools can take advantage of classroom celebrations to serve food that tastes good, is nutritious, and provides students with an opportunity for nutrition education experiences.

### But It's Just a Cupcake...



Typically, foods for school celebrations include cupcakes, candy, cookies and soda. So what's the harm? There is nothing wrong with an occasional treat, but unhealthy choices have become the norm rather than the exception. Parties, treats used as classroom rewards, food fundraisers, vending machines, snacks and school stores constantly expose children to high-fat, high-sugar, low-nutrient choices.

Overall, our children's eating habits are poor. Only two percent of children meet all Food Pyramid recommendations. Most children do not eat enough fruits, vegetables or whole grains. Obesity rates among children are on the rise, with serious health consequences. Constant exposure to low-nutrient foods makes it difficult for children to learn how to make healthy food choices. By providing students with nutritious choices wherever food is available (including the classroom), schools can positively influence children's eating habits.

## Benefits of Healthy Celebrations

**Healthy Kids Learn Better:** Research clearly demonstrates that good nutrition is linked to better behavior and academic performance. To provide the best possible learning environment for children, schools must also provide an environment that supports healthy behaviors.

**Provides Consistent Messages:** Providing healthy classroom celebrations demonstrates a school commitment to promoting healthy behaviors. It supports the classroom lessons students are learning about health, instead of contradicting them. Healthy celebrations promote positive lifestyle choices to reduce student health risks and improve learning.

**Promotes a Healthy School Environment:** In order to positively change eating behaviors, students need to receive consistent, reliable health information and ample opportunity to use it. Healthy celebrations are an important part of providing a healthy school environment.

**Creates Excitement About Nutrition:** Children are excited about new and different things, including fun party activities and healthy snacks (see back for ideas). School staff and parents need not worry that children will be disappointed if typical party foods aren't served in the classroom. Holiday treats and traditional birthday parties with cake will still be available at home.

**Protects Children with Food Allergies:** When parents send in food, it is difficult to ensure the safety of children with food allergies. Schools can protect food allergic children by providing nonfood celebrations or, if food is served, obtaining it from known sources such as the school food service program.



## How-To's for Happy Healthy Parties<sup>1</sup>

- Variety is the "spice of life" and the "life of the party." Plan several contrasting activities – active and quiet, indoor and outdoor, individual and group.
- Try something new. Children like adventure. In addition to familiar games and foods, offer something different.
- Plan creative experiences such as art, music and cooking.
- Involve children in planning and preparing the party. Let them make decorations and favors.
- Put food in its proper place. Refreshments should compliment the fun, not become the "main event."
- Be sure that each child receives a prize or favor, if such awards are given.
- Don't use food as rewards or prizes.
- Choose foods for fun, good taste and health. Parties that feature healthful foods provide opportunities for children to practice making wise food choices.



<sup>1</sup> Printed with permission from *Let's Party: Party Ideas for School and Home*. West Virginia Department of Education, 1994. Ordering information at: <http://wyde.state.wv.us/ctrc/materials.html>.