WHAT’S IN YOUR CHILD’S LUNCHBOX?

One of my kids came home the other day and told me (with abject horror, I am proud to say I have taught him well), that one of his classmates gets 2 chocolate-spread sandwiches on white bread every day for lunch. And, oh yeah Mom, that’s in addition to the cheese curls and can of soda the kid gets for snack. Okaaayy. As I squinted my eyes and tried to think of a way to rationalize this to him, I just couldn’t. So before I screamed “What?! Has his mother lost her mind?!” I took a deep breath and calmly explained that some parents really just don’t know about healthy food. His response, complete with one perfectly executed eyebrow-raise? “Seriously, Mom, I just turned 10, but even I know that has like, what, ZERO nutrition?” My sentiments exactly.

Anyhow, I know most reasonable parents wouldn’t be that extreme, but many times Moms who come and see me think they are giving their kids healthy lunches and snacks when in fact they’re not. So here are some things that really shouldn’t be in a child’s lunchbox (Note: this list was compiled by my 7 and 10 year old boys who told me what many of their classmates bring to school) and some alternative ideas to help you out in case you’re as nutritionally challenged as chocolate-sandwich mom:

1. **Fruit roll-ups**. Seriously, folks, there’s no actual “fruit” in a fruit roll-up. It’s basically a bunch of chemicals, food colorings and preservatives made into wax-like strips that you’d be better off creating some nice decorative wall art with. With all the chemicals in it, it’s guaranteed to last a lifetime, for your viewing enjoyment. They now have Florida naturals fruit strips so there’s no more excuses. Yes, they’re basically made of fruit juice and sugar but at least there’s no chemicals or preservatives so I’m okay with that as a treat.

2. **Regular or diet soda, fruit “cocktails”, and crystal light**. In my opinion, there’s really no excuse for giving kids soda, but diet soda and crystal light – made with aspartame or splenda – is even worse. You cannot complain that your child has zero concentration and is “difficult” when you are giving him or her a drink full of sugar, chemicals and artificial flavors and sweeteners every day that an adult’s body cannot process, much less a child. It simply doesn’t make sense. Instead give your child a cool bottle of purified water, and add some 100% fruit juice for flavor. If you want to really go nuts on your new quest for health, add a teaspoon of Fiberrific, a powdered inulin fiber that is completely tasteless. My kids still have no idea this is in their drinks every day. :-$

3. **Twizzlers, jelly beans, zours, and other colored candy**. Okay, I’m gonna give it to you straight. My absolute biggest pet peeve is food coloring, but especially Yellow #5, otherwise knows as Tartrazine. This famously allergenic food coloring is made from coal tar, a carcinogenic tar produced from refined raw coal. Oh trust me, I can’t make this stuff up. Still think the goverment gives a darn about what your kids are eating?
Think again. If you really want to give your kids candies, buy them from a health food store where there are plenty of varieties made with food extract colors (for example beet is often used as a red coloring) instead of the chemical food colors.

4. **Flavored potato chips, cheese puffs and other salty snacks containing MSG.** Chances are, unless you buy these types of snack from a health food store (and even then you have to check the ingredients since MSG is often disguised as autolyzed yeast extract) most will contain MSG. This allergenic “flavor enhancer” causes a variety of symptoms in people, headaches being the most common, but some other serious side effects have been reported. Plain potato chips, homemade or unflavored popcorn, all natural cheese puffs (again, health food store.....hmmm, starting to repeat myself here) are much better choices.

5. **Sandwiches on white bread.** White bread has the nutritional equivalent of a slice of low-fat cake. In other words, not much. Instead, your child’s tuna, egg, salmon or other sandwich should be on rye, kamut, spelt, multigrain or wholewheat bread (assuming your child is not sensitive to wheat or gluten, and many children are due to the much higher content of gluten found in wheat and wheat products these days.)

6. **Instant soup.** Instant soup might as well be called “MSG, chemicals and sodium in a container” ......enough said. Get a thermos, and give your child some homemade soup instead.

7. **Commercial chocolate pudding.** Hydrogenated fats, artificial flavors and lots of sugar make up this popular kids’ snack. I’m not sure why people think this is healthy, perhaps because it contains a tablespoon of milk? If it’s the calcium your looking for, that just ain’t the place to find it. Instead, give your child [organic](#) yogurt, the kind with the least amount of sugar you can find. Add some real fruit and voila, a tasty – and healthy – snack most kids enjoy.

8. **Salami, pastrami, and hot dogs.** Most parents know hot dogs aren’t healthy, but some still don’t know that salami, pastrami and other deli meats fall into the same category. The nitrates found in these foods have been linked with cancer, birth defects and childhood leukemia. I’m not trying to scare you here, but fact is fact. If your child likes deli meats and you want to put it in his or her sandwich, there are nitrate-free options (especially turkey slices) available.

9. **Dried fruit.** It’s not the “dried” or the “fruit” that’s the problem, it’s the fact that they are loaded with sodium sulfite/metabisulfite, otherwise known as sulphites, in order to retain their original color. Ever notice how perfectly orange a dried apricot is? Yep, that’s the sulphites, a common cause of asthma and allergy attacks. If you like dried fruit, make sure you buy the kind that says “unsulphered” on the package, and don’t worry when your dried apricots are in fact brown. That’s the color they’re supposed to be.

10. **Processed cheese.** If the term “processed cheese” didn’t tip you off that there was something possibly unhealthy about this, then I don’t know what will. Here’s another example of a “food” that has the shelf life of eternity. That’s never a good thing, unless you live in a bomb shelter under your house. For the love of your child, buy some real cheese, definitely organic and/or goat’s cheese which doesn’t contain the hormones and antibiotics that commercial cows milk cheese has.
I hope these simple tips help. And remember, if you like healthy food and you actually EAT healthy food, chances are pretty good your kids will too.... and oh yeah, try putting some cut up vegetables in his or her lunchbox every day. They just may surprise you by actually eating it.