



## School Parties: Putting the Health into Fun

From birthday to holiday parties throughout the school year, children and teachers have numerous reasons to celebrate. Celebrations are a great way for children to feel part of the school community, where the learning environment is made festive and where children, teachers and parents can come together to enjoy a break from the routine.

Traditionally school parties center around food. Foods such as cupcakes, cookies, candy, chips and beverages such as punch are often the central components of the school party menu. While these foods, in moderation, can be part of a healthy, well-balanced diet, these unhealthy choices have almost become daily norms in the classrooms rather than exceptions.

In the current climate of concern about childhood overweight, the establishment of Local School Wellness Policies, and the understanding that children who are well-nourished are better learners and are better behaved, it stands to reason that school parties are an avenue through which healthy alternatives can be included in the fun. Schools can take advantage of classroom celebrations to serve food that tastes great and is nutritious and allows for nutrition education for the students.

### Why Offer Healthy Alternatives at School Parties?

- Children love the idea of a party, a break from the routine and are usually not concerned about the foods that are offered at school parties. Children look forward to sharing free time with teachers, parents and their friends.
- Healthy alternatives at school parties provide a consistent message which supports important lessons about health, instead of contradicting them.
- When school parties promote health, schools are helping to positively change eating behaviors of children and parents.
- Children are excited about new and different things, including healthy party activities (see reverse) and healthy party snacks.
- When school parties include fruits, vegetables, whole grain snacks, low-fat flavored milk, cheese, or yogurt—even if cupcakes are offered—children learn that party food can also be healthy.

**The message is simple: Lifelong health choices begin now. Why not make school parties an opportunity for creating positive healthy habits?**

## Healthier School Parties: Teachers and Parents Working Together

In many school divisions in Virginia, Local School Wellness Policies encourage teachers to serve as role models for healthy choices and to help children develop lifelong habits of eating well and being active. School parties provide an excellent opportunity for teachers and parents alike to work together toward these goals. Parents look forward to being with their children during the school day and usually are the ones planning school parties. Often, teachers must lead the way in helping parents understand the importance of healthy alternatives to traditional party treats.

### Fun and Health at School Parties

- For an upcoming party, send a list home asking for parents to sign up to bring juice boxes, veggie platters, fruit trays, whole grain pretzels or crackers along with cupcakes OR cookies. Such a list lets parents know you think nutritional balance is important even during celebrations.
- Let the children plan a healthy party menu and prepare the food for their party. Ideas like orange smoothies, trail mix with raisins, cereal and dried fruit, and fruit salad are easy no-cook party fare. Parents can bring supplies.
- Plan a thematic craft for the party. For example, painting pumpkins for Halloween, or Valentine mailboxes for holding cards children will receive. Parents can be asked to bring in supplies.
- Party games are always a hit. Having a Back-to-School scavenger hunt where children look for school supply items is a lot of fun! Children love to hunt for treasure.
- Take some time to go outside—kids will appreciate the extra free time and fresh air built into the party.
- For goody bags, have parents bring pencils, erasers, or small toys and stickers instead of candy.
- Have a parent come and read special books related to the celebration. Children love hearing stories from someone new!

