

# Make the Healthy Choice for Your Kids - Summer Camp!

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By Dr. Stephen Fine, Published in City Parent Magazine, January 2008

## Summer Camp - The Healthy Choice

A great deal of media attention these days is focused on children's health and their level of fitness. The official prognosis by medical experts is poor and the gravity of the situation has prompted legislative action on the part of both the federal and Ontario governments.

The national Child Fitness Tax Credit, instituted in January of last year, rewards families who enroll their children in physical activity programs including summer camp. The recent Ontario government move to ban trans fats in school cafeterias is a case in point. Menus that meet the Canada Food Guide are a standard at all camps accredited by the Ontario Camping Association.

In addition to fun and friendship, going to camp can also instill healthy eating habits and an enjoyment of physical activity. Routine mealtimes, sensible portions and wholesome foods equal healthy eating habits. Combine this with a dynamic day of outdoor activity and you have the formula for a healthy lifestyle. These are some of the important life lessons that camp can provide.

## Regular Meals and Physical Activity

Sometimes a parent tells me, "My kids really enjoyed camp but say they were hungry all the time! Don't you provide any snacks?" Well, between meal snacks are one of the issues we all should be dealing with throughout the year. Should children be snacking between meals and if so what are they snacking on? Camps do offer healthy snacks such as apples and bananas and a controlled amount of sweets. Also feeling hungry is not a bad thing. After a physically active morning one should feel hungry. It's the brain's message that it's time to eat. Camp days are structured in such a way that kids are ready to take a break, sit down, and have a proper meal at scheduled times.

At camp cravings for food quickly adjust to the daily pattern. For example, everyone starts to feel hungry just before noon. Campers eagerly make their way to the dining hall. Shouts of, "What's for lunch?"



and "I'm starving!" ring out. Appetites are stimulated by the need to re-fuel and this is as it should be. But regular mealtimes can be a challenge for busy families and many children are not aware of when enough is enough; how much food is actually needed to maintain healthy weight and energy levels. And guess what else? Our bodies happen to like routine.

## No More Junk Foods

The days of crappy food at camp are gone. Camp menus have become much more appealing, varied and adventurous. Every summer a kid comes to camp who will initially only eat white bread and jam - breakfast, lunch and dinner. This can be a challenge at home but tends to be less of an issue in the camp dining hall. Kids like to mirror their peers and appetizing choices and a table full of hearty eaters can encourage even the pickiest child.

Most camps ask parents not to send junk food to camp. I remember one boy arrived with a locked storage box. The counselor was curious but Frank said it was just personal stuff he didn't want anyone to touch. When mealtimes came Frank would poke at his food and say he wasn't hungry. His parents mentioned that he was a picky eater. Eventually, Frank told his counselor that the box contained things he liked to eat. But the stash was running out and he was beginning to feel hungry and a little nervous. His counselor suggested he just might try a

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bite of something new at the next meal. Frank didn't go home a gourmet but to the amazement of his parents he did announce to them that broccoli and French beans were pretty good.

Camp is an incredible learning experience on many levels. It is absolutely essential that children develop healthy eating habits and a genuine enjoyment of physical activity. As we know bad habits are hard to break. So why not give your child the gift of healthy life habits? The Canadian Federal House of Commons Health Committee report indicates that about one quarter of Canadians aged two to seventeen are overweight or obese and are expected to live shorter lives than their parents. This sobering suggestion need not become a reality. Summer camp can be one way to insure a healthy future for our kids.

