



Breakfast could be the most important meal of the day for school kids

Think! – Breakfast

An alarming number of children start the day on an empty stomach and many teachers can vouch for the effects this has on classroom behaviour and student performance.

Around one in ten Australian children fall into this category and this can become a life long habit with even fewer teenagers 'breaking their fast' in the mornings. Some studies have found that children who don't eat breakfast have lower levels of iron, calcium, protein, dietary fibre, and some B vitamins than those children who do eat breakfast.

Children who are regular breakfast skippers are also more likely to have problems with weight gain and even tooth decay. Research has shown us that children who eat well at breakfast usually perform better academically, are happier at school, have an improved learning ability as well as an increased attention span than those who either eat poorly at breakfast or skip it altogether. They are less likely to experience hunger symptoms such as headache, fatigue, sleepiness and restlessness, are calmer and less anxious, have more energy to focus their attention on school work and tend to make better food choices throughout the day.

So do schools have a role in this area and is it in their best interests to encourage parents to send their kids to school with a full tummy? And if so, how do they go about it?

Research is fairly clear that nutrition is a key to all aspects of student performance and that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

For a teacher in the classroom well breakfasted students can mean the difference between co-operation and defiance,

focus and inattention, or enthusiasm and lethargy. It can mean the difference between a lesson well learned and a waste of time. In the playground it can also have an impact, as research shows us that children who are well nourished are less aggressive and have fewer behavioural problems than those who eat poorly.

All around, consumption of breakfast means a better outcome for everyone. There are various ways that a school can play a role in encouraging their students to eat a good breakfast and be pro-active in supporting and promoting the benefits.

Here are six suggestions:

- 1 Start a breakfast club for kids who regularly come to school without breakfast. Organise local traders or large organisations to sponsor the program. Have it completely funded if possible or keep it very low cost and involve parents, volunteers and the wider community as much as possible. Breakfast clubs have been running successfully in many countries for some years and schools are finding that the benefits are enormous.
- 2 Educate and inform parents via the school newsletter. Send home simple recipes and brain power breakfast ideas along with explanations of the importance of breakfast for kids at school. Include articles that talk about the correlation between food and brain development. Studies show that parent education has a significant impact on behaviour change in the school environment.
- 3 Liaise with the school canteen to ensure there are healthy, low cost choices available during recess for hungry children. Minimise or remove less nutritious choices and ensure the canteen has a welcoming and non judgmental attitude towards students who are sent to school without breakfast.
- 4 Have a whole school breakfast once a month or once a term where all the students eat a healthy breakfast at school. Ask local businesses, such as the local greengrocer to donate or subsidise the food. Incorporate a physical activity such as walking to school, aerobics sessions or running around the oval.
- 5 Run a Brainy Breakfast awareness campaign for a week. Have a classroom breakfast, make announcements over the PA, invite guest speakers to talk about healthy breakfasts, offer in school competitions for the best Brain Power Breakfast Poster, the best Healthy Breakfast Recipe, best Breakfast Menu etc.
- 6 Incorporate lessons about the importance of breakfast in classroom nutrition education. Teach children about the relationship between food and academic performance. Make some simple breakfast dishes together such as smoothies or porridge. These are new tastes for many children and taste testing helps break down barriers to resistance.

It is possible for schools to make a real difference in this area with some of these simple steps and the bonus will be better fed, happier and more attentive students.

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To find out more go to www.naturalkitchenstrategies.com.au or tel (03) 9500 8003.

