

The Healthy Snack Philosophy

By Viki Kappel Spain

The role of the food service director and cooks in the camp industry is vital: What gets served from the camp kitchen supplies nourishment, warmth (both literal and figurative) and energy to the campers. It is up to the cooks to provide a healthy, yet enticing, menu so all concerned will leave the tables full, satisfied and properly energized.

What often gets overlooked in the food arena is the all-important snack. Snacks are offered to campers and groups on a daily basis, from fruit and crackers served from the kitchen to pure sugar and caffeine being offered in the camp store. It might just be well worth the trouble for the camp director and the food service director to join hands in a cooperation effort for the kids' sake. Children who are wired and pumped up on refined sugar "burn out" quickly, they become crabby and less tolerant of arising situations with cabin-mates, and they are more prone to getting sick if exposed to colds and flu.

Kids all over the world like to make their own choices, and when a camper is given a choice between two healthy snacks, the staff can rest assured that the camper will function better because of the proper nutrition.

Some healthy snack options to be served from the kitchen or offered in the camp store are:

- fresh fruit
- juices instead of soda
- no caffeine
- nuts and seeds
- dried fruit or fruit rollups
- part-wheat crackers and low-fat cheese
- nut-raisin trail mixtures
- limit "empty calorie" items (potato chips, candy bars, soda)
- cereal-based snacks (Kix and raisins make a great mix)
- other healthy creations based on cultural or special requests

The child-observing world of schools and day-care centers have seen great results with offering healthy snacks to children. This information can be passed on to camps and other short-term child-care situations, with benefits seen immediately. Children not pumped up on sugar and caffeine statistically have a longer attention span, emotions run more even-keel, and routine colds and flu seem to side-step the child maintained on a healthy diet.

Another approach to the snacks served and available at camp is the schedule and timing of when snacks are served or how often the camp store is open. If the camp store is

available for extended hours throughout the day, campers may gravitate to the store if they are bored and may want to “just buy something” to be spending money. However, if the camp store is open for one hour in the morning and two hours immediately after lunch, campers will come for purchases with a more specific intent than just killing time.

To compliment this reduced or selected hours of the camp store, the campers can be limited to how much sugar or caffeine they can purchase. Even 16-year-olds shouldn't be drinking 2,4 or 6 cans of soda a day, even if they tell you “I do this all the time at home.” A full-sugar-and-caffeine soda (the name-brand colas) packs more of a punch than three just-sugar sodas because of the combination. If campers are allowed to purchase one soda and one high-sugar item (candy bars, etc.), and not-so-limited amounts of other snack items, the camp director and counselors may see quite a difference in the behavior of the campers.

The camp store staff can also be a tremendous support to the system by encouraging fruit juices and low-sugar items, as well as healthy non-sugar snacks.

Camp directors and counselors need to constantly be aware of the campers' financial situations and the possible lack of funds for purchasing a large number of items at the camp store and may need to be steered to the “free” fruit bowl in the dining hall. (Some camps may already have a “campership” store fund available for the children who do not bring store money, allowing them to have one soda and one snack each day so they aren't left out in the cabin group.)

Whatever the case may be at each individual camp, each camp director, food service director and cabin counselor needs to be aware of the huge impact that food plays in the daily functioning of the campers. If camps want tired, crabby and whiney kids all week, keep the sugar and caffeine flowing. If camps want properly energized, satisfied and happy campers, a few adjustments can be experimented with to see just how good it can get.