

Healthy Celebrations



Promoting a Healthy School Environment

Birthday parties and holiday celebrations at school provide a unique opportunity to make healthy eating fun and exciting for children. Schools can take advantage of classroom celebrations to serve nutritious foods that taste good and provide students with an opportunity to learn about healthy eating.

But It's Just a Cupcake...

School celebrations often include unhealthy foods like cupcakes, candy, cookies, and soda. While there is nothing wrong with an occasional treat, constant exposure to low-nutrient foods compromises children's health and learning. Healthy choices are important because most children consume too many calories from solid fats and added sugars; and do not consume enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, or calcium-rich foods. The [*Dietary Guidelines for Americans*](#) indicates that 41 percent of children and adolescents are overweight or have obesity, which puts them at high risk of serious health concerns. By providing students with nutritious foods at school celebrations, schools can create an environment that positively influences children's health and learning and teaches healthy lifestyle choices that continue into adulthood.



Benefits of Healthy Celebrations

- **Healthy kids learn better:** Research clearly demonstrates that good nutrition is linked to better behavior and academic performance. To provide the best possible learning environment for children, schools must also provide an environment that supports healthy behaviors.
- **Provide consistent messages:** Providing healthy classroom celebrations demonstrates a school commitment to promoting healthy behaviors. It supports the classroom lessons students are learning about health instead of contradicting them. Healthy celebrations promote positive lifestyle choices to reduce student health risks and improve learning.
- **Promote a healthy school environment:** To improve eating behaviors, students need consistent, reliable health information and ample opportunity to use it. Healthy celebrations are an important part of providing a healthy school environment.
- **Create excitement about nutrition:** Children are excited about new and different things, including fun party activities and healthy snacks. School staff and parents need not worry that children will be disappointed if typical party foods are not served in the classroom. Holiday treats and traditional birthday parties with cake will still be available at home.
- **Protect children with food allergies:** It is difficult to ensure that food sent from home is safe for children with food allergies. Schools can protect children with food allergies by providing nonfood celebrations or obtaining food from known sources, such as the school food service program.

Choose foods for fun, good taste, and health. Parties that feature healthy foods provide opportunities for children to practice making wise food choices.

Healthy Celebrations

Schools can help promote a positive learning environment by providing healthy celebrations that shift the focus from food to the children. Choose a variety of activities, games, and crafts that children enjoy. When serving food, make it count with healthy choices and avoid using food as rewards or prizes. Parties can even incorporate a fun nutrition lesson by involving children in the planning and preparation of healthy snacks. Try these ideas for fun activities and healthy foods at school celebrations. For more ideas, refer to “Healthy Celebrations” in the Connecticut State Department of Education’s (CSDE) [Resource List for Wellness Policies in Schools and Child Care](#).

Activities to Celebrate Children

- Plan special party games and activities or creative experiences such as art, music, and cooking. Ask parents to provide game supplies, pencils, erasers, stickers, and other small school supplies instead of food.
- Organize a classroom treasure hunt with nonfood prizes.
- Create a healthy party idea book for staff and parents. Ask school staff and parents to provide healthy recipes and ideas for activities, games, and crafts.
- Give children extra recess time instead of a class party. Let the birthday child choose and lead an active game.
- Provide special time with the principal or another adult, such as taking a walk around the school at recess.
- Instead of food, ask parents to purchase a book in the birthday child’s name for the classroom or school library, and read it to the class.
- Instead of a party, organize a special community service project, e.g., invite senior citizens in for lunch or make blankets for rescue dogs. Involve parents in planning and providing needed materials.
- Create a “Celebrate Me” book. Have classmates write stories or poems and draw pictures about the birthday child.
- Create a special birthday event. The birthday child wears a sash and crown, sits in a special chair, and visits the principal’s office for a special birthday surprise like a pencil, sticker, or birthday card.
- Make the birthday child the teacher’s assistant for the day and let them do special tasks like leading the line, starting an activity, or choosing a game or story.

Healthy Food Ideas

Offer healthy options like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat or fat-free dairy products, and water. Check for food allergies before serving. Some ideas to try include:

- fruit and yogurt smoothies;
- fruit and cheese kabobs, fruit salad, and sliced fruit with low-fat yogurt dip;
- vegetable trays with low-fat dip and carrot/celery sticks with peanut butter;
- whole-grain crackers with string cheese or hummus;
- whole-grain tortilla chips with salsa or bean dip;
- whole-grain, low-sugar cereal mixed with dried fruit; and
- yogurt parfaits or banana splits (low-fat yogurt and fruit topped with whole-grain granola).

For a list of commercial products that meet the [Connecticut Nutrition Standards](#), visit the Connecticut State Department of Education’s [List of Acceptable Foods and Beverages](#) webpage.