

Think about choosing non-food or healthier food alternatives for birthdays and classroom parties.

Keep it simple! Remember, the goal is to celebrate the child and make them feel special.

Birthdays are important to every child and many kids like to celebrate with their classmates. However, sending in a food treat to the classroom to celebrate can exclude those children who have food allergies, diabetes or other dietary restrictions. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2011) allergies have increased more than 20% among American children since the mid 1990's.

Promoting non-food celebrations & rewards in school can be a valuable opportunity to demonstrate that happiness & celebrations do not have to be associated with unhealthy eating

There are many disadvantages to using food as a reward.

Long-term psychological effects of using food for reward, comfort and instantaneous gratification and the number of adults rewarding a child with food within a single day can be staggering in our culture. Even if your child or your children are not currently overweight, please consider the following:

- It undermines nutrition education (our words do not match our actions)
- It excludes some students who cannot (or should not) eat these foods – allergic and diabetic children cannot be at their best when they consume some of these foods.
- It teaches kids to eat when they're not hungry as a reward to themselves.
- In smaller children, the empty calories end up replacing higher nutrient-dense foods that would be eaten at the next mealtime. It is well known that children who suffer from poor nutrition score lower on tests.

Below are some suggestions for celebrating your child without food:

1. Come into the classroom and read a book to the class.
2. Buy something for the classroom (books, games, music).
3. Decorate a box and send it into the classroom. Also send index cards or smaller pieces of paper.
4. Bring in something that all the kids can sign as a birthday treat for the birthday kid (shirt/sweatshirt, tote bag, autograph stuffed animal, pillow case, etc.).
5. Ask the teacher if you can have a show and tell time for your child on their birthday. They can make a poster, bring in some of their favorite things, bring pictures, tell the kids about their favorite things or life at their house, etc.
6. Ask the teacher if you can send in a dance song, and have the whole class do the hokey pokey, the chicken dance, or the booty slide, whatever is your child's favorite!
7. Donate a plant, seeds, or a bulb for the school garden. Pick your child's favorite vegetable to plant.
8. Donate a book to the school library in honor of your child. Maybe the librarian could read this book to your child's class during library time.

Simple quick healthy food ideas:

Popcorn cones or cups: kids can decorate cups with stickers, glitter glue, or marker drawings and then fill with homemade popcorn. Alternatively, provide small paper bags for decorating. Each child will get a souvenir and some yummy popcorn.

Fresh Fruit: any kind- try kabobs, a fruit plate, with or without dippers, fruit salad in cupcake wrappers or ice cream cones.

Veggies: carrot sticks, cucumbers, celery, tomatoes. Kids love dipping- add a ranch dressing or hummus.

Smoothies: blend yogurt and fruit, and even mix in a green (spinach, kale) if you like. To make it festive bring in birthday cups for serving.

Popsicles: 100% fruit juice, if store bought

Berries: Top with real whipped cream in a birthday cup.

Ideas for those who love to bake and cook:

Mini muffins: Homemade muffins can be very healthy! Carrot, blueberry, strawberry, banana. Cut the sugar in half or find a recipe with lower sugar (about ½ cup of sugar per recipe). Use whole-wheat or another whole grain flour, or add ground flaxseeds and/or wheat germ for extra nutrition

Yogurt parfaits: In clear plastic cups, alternate layers of yogurt (preferably plain and organic) and fresh fruit such as blueberries, strawberries or mangos, and a lower-sugar (<6 grams) granola. Top with toothpick umbrellas.

Homemade Popsicles: These will need to stay frozen until the celebration time. At home, you can blend plain yogurt (Mermaid Farm-in West Tisbury but also sold at Cronigs- yogurt works really well) and frozen fruit- strawberries or mangos work really well. Freeze into popsicles for the class. You can also freeze these in small paper cups and the kids can peel down the sides to eat them.

Note: if you have a child with a food allergy in your class room please make sure to talk to your child's teacher before bringing in any foods. You can also consult with your school nurse regarding these issues.

***Remember that birthday snacks are often served *in addition* to regular snacks. Birthday treats only need to be a small serving for each kid.**

