To answer this question, researchers at The University of Texas at Austin conducted a pilot study in three Texas cities. Trained dieticians observed the lunch contents of 74 preschoolers in five full-time licensed child care centers. Two of the centers were nonprofit and three were for profit. All centers required families to provide lunches.

What researchers found from a three-day analysis of lunches sent in from home was disturbing. More than half of the observed lunches provided less than minimum amounts of the calories, carbohydrates, vitamin A, calcium, iron, and zinc recommended for preschoolers at lunch. Overall, the study of the preschoolers’ packed lunches found that

- 71% did not include the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables
- 80% did not meet requirements for milk—fruit juices were packed instead
- 96% provided less than the minimum recommended amount of dietary fiber

In fact, the only thing that these meals provided in abundance was salt—114% of the recommended daily allowance.

Every day 13 million U.S. children eat meals and snacks at child care programs. These meals are opportunities for children to get the nutrients they need for healthy growth and development. As their budgets tighten, more and more child care programs are asking families to prepare children’s lunches and snacks. Almost half of the child care centers in Texas have stopped offering lunches for cost reasons. As the responsibility for children’s lunches shifts from program to home, researchers are wondering if children’s nutritional needs are being met.
What caused this situation? Researchers determined it wasn’t a lack of knowledge. Every participating family member reported knowing the importance to children’s health and learning of serving a nutritious lunch. Yet nearly two-thirds stated that they packed a lunch they thought their child would eat, not one that would meet the child’s nutritional needs. Indeed, 55% of the surveyed parents told researchers that they knew their children’s lunches were low on fruits, vegetables, and fiber and were high in salt. Processed, packaged junk foods such as chips, soda, candy, desserts, and high-sugar drinks were the bulk of what parents sent and preschoolers ate for lunch.

What can you do?

What researchers found in Texas may or may not represent a national trend. In any case, preschool teachers can work with children’s families to support healthy eating at all meals, including lunch. Here are some ideas.

**Provide information.** Keep the information coming throughout the year, rather than providing it all at one time.

- Send home information on preschoolers’ nutritional requirements, including copies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s MyPyramid for Preschoolers, which families can post in their kitchens as a reference (http://mypyramid.gov/preschoolers/index.html).

- Provide examples of healthy lunch menus, including quantities considered appropriate for preschoolers. If you have access to a nutrition professional in your community, work with him or her to share examples of safe, nutritious food choices.

- Encourage parents to plan and pack lunches that include fruits, vegetables, dairy products, lean protein, and fiber. Let families know that lunches can be refrigerated, so they can include perishable items that are high in nutritional value.

- Create a family handout with tips based on the family style dining approach used in many classrooms. Include the following key messages about relaxing family mealtimes:
  - Even young children can help set the table and clear dirty dishes.
  - Children like to serve themselves.
  - Parents and children can have quiet conversations about their day.
  - Children gradually learn to take turns, pass food to others, and say please and thank you while eating with siblings and parents.
  - Accidents are to be expected as children learn to handle utensils; let them help to clean up spills.

- Add a Healthy Lunch column to the classroom newsletter, featuring recipes and suggestions for healthy lunch box options. Invite families to share tips with each other: “Our son loves whole wheat tortillas. The small size is just enough to satisfy his appetite.”

- Offer practical, helpful tips on packing healthy lunches. Remember that working parents are busy balancing their work and home responsibilities. You can help by suggesting to families convenient ways to have healthy lunch foods on hand, such as:
  - Plan for healthy lunches when writing the family grocery list and stock the refrigerator and pantry with healthy items. This way it will be as easy to reach for a banana as for cookies when packing meals.

- Prepackage child-size portions of healthy items, such as cherry tomatoes or carrot sticks, once a week. These are easy to pop into a lunch box.

- Use dinner leftovers for a child’s lunch. For most families, dinners are the most thought-out and balanced meal of the day. Leftovers can provide a convenient and nutritious base for a healthy lunch.

**Encourage families to keep introducing new foods, in small portions.** Research shows that the more frequently children are exposed to new foods, the more likely they will be to taste and enjoy them. It may take as many as 14 or 15 tries before a child will taste a new food (Platkin 2007). It also helps to introduce new foods alongside a child’s favorites. Eventually, children will start asking their moms and dads to pack some edamame (baby soybeans) for lunch along with their favorite cheese sandwich.

**Share children’s books that teach healthy eating habits.** Books like Good Enough to Eat: A Kid’s Guide to Food and Nutrition, by Lizzy Rockwell, teach children about healthy eating. Parents and children can learn together as they read aloud the same books you read to children in your program.

**Help families individualize for their child.** Some children have food allergies. Nearly all children have food favorites. It can be difficult to pack lunches that accommodate both a child’s health concerns and personal preferences. Through joint problem solving, teachers and parents can come up with a strategy. For example, some children get upset if foods touch
each other. In this case, a parent can wrap items individually, so the child can eat each item separately. Remind families that children can help pack their own lunches.

Encourage parents to be role models. Children’s eating habits are greatly influenced by parents and older siblings. If family meals offer nutritious choices and everyone eats fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and lean protein, children learn that their family values healthy eating. Preschoolers who witness healthy food choices will choose healthy foods too.

REFERENCE

Resources available from NAEYC

MyPyramid for Preschoolers Poster
24” x 18” Laminated
Item #452
Nonmembers: $15
Members: $12
(Also available in tablet form; see item #453)
From Learning ZoneXpress

Start Children Out on the Right Track Poster
18” x 24”
Item #4123
Nonmembers: $15
Members: $12
From Learning ZoneXpress

Tummy Yummies: Healthy, Fun Snacks for Kids! Poster
18” x 23” Laminated
Item #431
Nonmembers: $9
Members: $7.20
From Learning ZoneXpress

The Cooking Book: Fostering Young Children’s Learning and Delight, by Laura J. Colker
Item #140
Nonmembers: $20
Members: $16

To read the study in its entirety, see:

The preschool years are critical years for children’s development and learning. To work and play at their full potential, children need nutritious lunches. This is also a critical age for forming food habits. The way children learn to eat when they are young sets a pattern that lasts a lifetime. Teachers and families can work together to make sure children have many healthy food choices.