

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

A World of Diversity in Children's Lunchboxes

ONE OF THE WAYS CHILDREN LEARN about positive attitudes toward diversity is through food. Cultures place value on different diets and foods, but one of the things we have in common as human beings is enjoying conviviality while we eat. At school, eating lunch is a social experience, which exposes children to the variety of food that other families eat at home, dishes that may have unfamiliar appearances or smells. In a sense, each family has its own culture relating to food, and sensitivities about cuisine run deep.

The subject of people's feelings about food furnishes golden opportunities for teaching children to treat each other with tolerance and respect. Most people are vigilant about teaching children not to make fun of another person because of the way he looks or acts, but it's also important for even young children to learn not to tease a classmate because of the food she eats. Discussing the importance of accepting other people's food choices provides an opportunity for children to learn about other cultures and acquire the vocabulary to talk about food choices in a socially sensitive way. One of the basics might be different forms of bread enjoyed around the world: challah, pita, corn bread, tortillas, naan.

There are lots of different attitudes about food today that can lead children to believe that what they eat is superior. Some children hold up treats from home and taunt other children for not having any. Others may have been taught that sweets are bad or that eating meat is unhealthy. The basic lesson that children need to learn is that food choices are personal, and that it's never appropriate to comment negatively about what someone else is eating or the way they eat.

Eating with others exposes children to new worlds of food, and their ability to understand and appreciate differences will help them lead rich lives in the future.

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