TIPS FOR Healthy
CLASSROOM CELEBRATIONS IN EARLY LEARNING

Includes child approved recipe!
Healthy Classroom Celebrations
Tips and Recipe

How are birthdays and holidays observed in your early learning classroom? Special occasions are often celebrated by sharing foods like cake, cookies, candy, or chips. If your child care program is working to support children in developing healthy eating behaviors, offering these treats on a regular basis can undermine messages about nutritious foods.

Young children are strongly influenced by the messages about food that they’re exposed to at home and school. Always serving treats for special events sends the message that these less nutritious foods are celebration foods, and children learn to associate happy times with unhealthy food. You can help children associate celebrations with healthier foods or fun activities that aren’t food-based.

There are several approaches you can take to start sending new messages to children about celebrations.

FOUR TIPS

1. Invite children to **bake healthy cupcakes or cake** at school. This involves the whole class in the celebration and gets parents off the hook. Check out the recipe on the next page for a child tested Butternut Squash Cake! It’s from the Early Sprouts curriculum.

2. If you want to keep parents involved, **provide a list of foods that can be brought in for classroom celebrations**, such as a colorful fruit salad, veggies with dip, or whole grain crackers with cheese. You can also give them some recipes for healthy baked goods.

3. Celebrate holidays by **exploring customs and healthy foods from other cultures**, especially the ones that reflect the backgrounds of the families you work with.

4. Make a **new fun activity**, rather than food, the focus of the celebration.

**Celebrating in a special way is more important than eating unhealthy treats to mark the occasion.**
Butternut Squash Cake (or Cupcakes!)

Here’s a recipe from the Early Sprouts curriculum for you to try for your next classroom celebration. It makes a delicious, healthy birthday cake that doesn’t need frosting. Invite everyone to help make it—children will enjoy taking part in the party preparations.

- 2 cups cooked butternut squash (see how to cook squash below)
- ¾ cup sugar
- ½ cup canola oil
- 4 eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 2 cups white whole wheat flour
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp salt
- Non-stick cooking spray

1. To cook squash: Cut in half from top to bottom. Place cut side down in a baking dish with about 1” of water. Bake at 400° for 45 minutes or until flesh is soft. Remove seeds and scoop flesh from skin.
2. Preheat oven to 350° F.
3. Spray a 9x13” baking pan with non-stick cooking spray.
4. Puree the baked squash in a food processor or mash it very well with a masher.
5. In a large bowl, stir together the squash, sugar, oil, eggs, and vanilla.
6. In a medium bowl, combine flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt.
7. Add flour mixture to squash mixture. Stir only until flour mixture is fully moistened. Do not over mix.
8. Spread batter in prepared pan. Bake 40 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean when inserted into the center of the cake.
9. You can also bake this recipe in a muffin tin—it makes 18 squash cupcakes.

Remember...
- “Celebration” does not have to mean eating unhealthy food.
- Pairing nutritious foods with celebrations sends the message that good nutrition can be fun.
- You can also celebrate special occasions without involving food.

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