



PHOTOGRAPHY WINSTON CHUANG STYLING LOY SEE JIN

## canteen capers

Could your child be filling up on junk food in school without your knowledge? Nutrition experts and mums share their strategies for helping him make better choices. By **SASHA GONZALES**

When Karen Tang found empty rice cracker packets in her seven-year-old son's school bag, she flipped.

"I don't allow him to eat junk food, so I was angry when I found out that he had been eating rice crackers for recess," the 37-year-old account executive shares.

"He gets \$1.20 a day to spend on his snack, but I expected him to make healthier or more substantial choices, like fresh fruit or noodles. I had to explain to him why I didn't like him eating crackers and other processed packet snacks.

"Now, he knows what foods are off-limits and only spends his money on nutritious snacks."

Office manager Clara Ho, 42, had recess problems with her kid, too. "When my daughter started primary school a few years ago, she had trouble finishing her lunch when she came home. My mother-in-law also noticed that she was sluggish. This went on for a couple of months.

"Eventually we found out why – she had been filling up on fried chicken nuggets during recess. With all the sodium and fat she was consuming, it's no wonder she was feeling that way.

"As much as I hated doing it, I cut her daily allowance so that she would only have enough money for a piece of fruit. And she took a sandwich from home. This went on till she started Primary 2, when I felt more confident about her ability to make more sensible food decisions for herself."

### If he doesn't know how to make smart food choices

It's a familiar tale. For the first time in his life, your child has a small amount of money to spend on whatever he wants, and, although our primary schools have stopped selling a lot of the unhealthy snacks and beverages that you grew up with – for instance, potato chips and soft drinks – he still ends up buying the types of food you'd rather he avoided.

But the last thing you want is to ban him from buying anything at all during recess. After all, you don't want to deprive him of the opportunity to be independent by learning to wait in line at the stall, order food for himself and make his own food choices.

You can start guiding him to make better decisions by teaching him how to distinguish healthy snacks from unhealthy ones.

Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietician at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants, says to teach your child to avoid anything in snack packs, such as potato crisps and other cracker-type tidbits, battered foods like chicken nuggets, anything coated in chocolate,

creamy or mayonnaise-laden foods, oily foods like *mee goreng*, *bee hoon* and fried fishcake – which often have a shiny surface – pastries like cake and doughnuts, and sweetened drinks.

Acceptable recess foods would include sandwiches with wholemeal or seeded bread, chicken or beef with rice and vegetables, soupy foods, milk, water, and 100 per cent fruit juice with no added sugar.

"To make it even simpler for your child, take him to the supermarket or food court and show him exactly what foods to choose and avoid," Jaclyn adds. Also teach him how to ask for less gravy or more vegetables to make his meal a little more nutritious.

Marie Ang, 39, knows how stressful recess time can be for young kids. It's noisy and crowded, and when your little one is hungry and pressed for time, he most certainly will not be thinking about what's healthy and what's not.

This is why she decided to simplify the decision-making process for her son when he started primary school this year: "I found out what the canteen sold, and then told my son what to buy on the various days. And every day, I give him just enough money for that particular snack.

"So, for example, on Monday, he knows to buy a chicken burger. On Tuesday, it's soup-based noodles. On

Wednesday, it's sushi, and so on. Come recess time, he heads straight to that stall and orders his food, no drama."

### If he keeps eating the same thing over and over again

If you've just found out that Junior has been eating *roti prata* every day for the last three months, there is hope, says Susie Rucker, a nutritional therapist at healthcare centre Body With Soul.

"While I would not recommend *roti prata* as a proper meal, because it's just simple carbohydrates and a lot of fat, there's no reason why your child can't eat it once in a while.

"Make it a Friday-only treat, for instance, and ask him to order it with a side of protein, like chicken, and some veggies to make it more balanced."

It's important for children to get some protein during recess, Susie emphasises. Protein helps stabilise their blood sugar levels, aids in the growth and repair of muscles, and boosts concentration and brain function.

If you'd prefer your kid to not eat a certain dish at all for recess, Jaclyn says to tell him that, because it is a "treat" food, he is allowed to enjoy it only occasionally, and only when he's with you.

"There's no reason why he cannot indulge in these foods, but it should be under your control."



### If he's not hungry at breakfast, and starving at recess

Rae Chan's daughter is not a big breakfast eater. So, by recess, the nine-year-old is so hungry that she scoffs down a big plate of fried noodles.

But the fattening dish often leaves her feeling bloated and lethargic by the end of the school day, notes Rae, 41, a stay-at-home mum.

Susie says that you can minimise this problem by giving your kid the right food for breakfast. Some options include a hard-boiled egg or the smaller quail eggs, which may be easier to eat, a piece of hard cheese with a few brown rice crackers, a small

homemade berry smoothie, or a homemade chicken patty made from minced chicken and vegetables.

These can all be eaten quickly at home or while your child is on the way to school, and they will stave off those mid-morning hunger pangs that drive him to order big portions of unhealthy foods. (Turn to page 90 for healthy toast ideas for breakfast.)

### If he eats very slowly

Perhaps Junior has no problem selecting healthy snacks at recess, but you've found that, because he's such a slow eater, he hardly has time to finish what he's bought.

In this case, Jaclyn says to tell him not to order hot food, as these usually take a while to consume.

"Cut fruit or sandwiches are a good idea – the queues at these stalls tend to move pretty quickly, and your kid should be able to finish his snack by the time recess is over."

These foods are more filling than other foods that can be eaten quickly, such as chips and crackers, for example.

But fruit and sandwiches can get boring after a while, so your child may want to buy food that require little to no chewing. Jaclyn suggests soya bean curd – as long as it is not drowned in sugar syrup – or low-fat yogurt.

Do, however, caution Junior from ordering yogurt drinks, as these are usually high in sugar.

If your child has poor hand coordination and takes ages using a fork and spoon, he can go for meals that can be eaten with just one utensil, like fried rice or noodles, or soup.

### If he loads up on sugary drinks

Thankfully, many primary schools no longer sell carbonated soft drinks. However, this doesn't mean that everything the drinks stall has to offer is super healthy, either.

Susie believes that water is the best choice for kids. If his canteen sells fresh juices, he can order carrot or watermelon juice, which are nutritionally superior to fruit juices in tetra packs.

If he only wants to drink during recess, Milo is acceptable, and a much better option than soft drinks, which can cause problems such as unstable blood sugar levels and weight gain.

It's considered a "nutritious drink" says Jaclyn, as it contains three to four teaspoons of sugar – compared to the seven or more teaspoons in a soft drink can – as well as iron, magnesium, B vitamins, and some protein.

### If he's sick of canteen food

Once in a while, you may decide to pack some food for him to take to school. A healthy snack, says Jaclyn, would be something that is low in added sugar and high in dietary fibre.

This will prevent that dreaded "sugar high" and keep his tummy satisfied until lunchtime. Food safety is also important, so pack foods that do not spoil easily.

"Your best bets would be wholewheat crackers with a packet of UHT low-fat milk, or a reduced-fat peanut butter or cheese sandwich made with wholemeal bread, an apple or a small box of raisins, and a pack of UHT low-fat milk," she says. "The idea is to provide some carbohydrates with a little protein as well."

