

Taking the stress out of weekday breakfasts with kids

By **Mari-Jane Williams** August 7, 2013

Breakfast can be a nightmare for parents. Bethesda mom Amy Corbett Storch's three sons were waking up ravenous and cranky, and were consuming too many processed foods in the rush to get ready for school. Elaine Maag of Arlington was spending her mornings arguing with her picky son about what he would eat. Alison Pardi's three kids start their day with chocolate brownie-flavored Kids ZBars, but the Woodbridge mother knows her 5-year-old will need to eat something more healthful, and with more protein, when he starts kindergarten next month.

It's become a cliché, but it's true: Breakfast matters. Research shows that children who eat a well-balanced morning meal do better academically, are better able to focus and are less likely to be obese.

"Breakfast sets our kids up for success," said Sam Kass, an assistant chef at the White House and executive director of [Let's Move!](#), the first lady's campaign to end childhood obesity. "A child who goes to school having not eaten at all or having had a bag of chips or soda for breakfast is not going to have the fuel or nourishment they need to be successful."

It's so crucial, Kass said, that it's a requirement for the Obama family: Everyone has to eat before they leave the house in the morning.

But if it's such an important meal, why are so many of us sending our children to school fueled by sugary cereals, snack bars and frozen waffles drenched in syrup?

Mornings are often chaotic, with everyone rushing to get out the door. Picky eaters demanding frosted cereals battle parents who are trying to start their kids' day with more nutritious choices. And sometimes, children just aren't hungry when they wake up.

Some experts agree that breakfast should include protein and some healthful carbohydrates, and children should consume between 300 and 600 calories in the morning, depending on their age. But how to turn the nightmare into a dream that resembles [My Plate](#), the government's recommendations for what we should be eating? Here are some suggestions on how to regain control of the morning meal.

Share your stories: We want to hear about your morning routine, what you eat and what your kids eat (or refuse to). [Tell us here and we'll compile the best responses.](#)

Relax. Parents shouldn't put too much pressure on themselves to have their children sit down every morning to eat eggs and homemade oatmeal. Breakfast doesn't have to mean breakfast food, and if your kids have to eat on the go occasionally, it's okay, said Angela Lemond, a spokeswoman for the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#).

“The food police are not going to come and arrest you if you have leftovers or a sandwich for breakfast,” Lemond said. “You just need to have adequate nutrients, something more than just a snack.”

Amy Suardi, a mother of four in upper Northwest Washington (with a fifth child due this month), said one of her children is particularly picky and occasionally refuses to eat certain food, such as bananas or cereal. Serving non-breakfast food, such as reheated pasta or cheese and crackers with cold cuts and fruit, makes things easier, said Suardi, who writes the blog [Frugal Mama](#).

For those days when your kids don't have time to sit down and eat, Lemond suggests grabbing something like blueberries and Greek yogurt or making a fruit smoothie for them to scarf down on the way to school.

Timing matters. Lemond said mornings go more smoothly in her house when she is showered and finished getting ready for work before her children, ages 9 and 6, get up for breakfast.

Storch, however, sets an alarm clock for her two older children to wake up about half an hour before she does. That gives them time to play or just relax, and puts them in a better mood when they come to the table. The family starts preparing breakfast around 7:30.

Storch has a large clock in the kitchen so Noah, 7, and Ezra, 4, will know how much time they have to finish eating. Noah has to be done and ready for the bus by 8:15; Ezra knows he leaves for preschool at 8:30. These little tweaks to their routine have helped transform what had been a stressful time for the family.

“We were always scrambling; we were always late,” said Storch, who writes the blog [Amalah](#). “I was trying to do too much.”

Plan ahead. Hard-cook a dozen eggs over the weekend and have them ready to peel and go during the week, Lemond suggested. Oatmeal, which you can toss in the crockpot and cook overnight, also can be reheated quickly with a little milk later in the week, she added.

“My husband gets up super early, so I’m pretty much single parenting in the mornings,” Lemond said. “I try to do a lot of things the night before.”

Storch makes an extra-large batch of whole wheat pancakes (see recipe on page XX) on the weekends, then freezes them and reheats them in the toaster during the week.

Planning, whether it’s preparing enough oatmeal on a Sunday night to last for a few days or cutting up fruit in the evening to serve with yogurt the next morning, can make the mornings easier, Kass said.

“Parents are busy; mornings are always hectic,” Kass said. “Making breakfast part of the routine is an important place to begin. Breakfast can be really simple and quick, as long as it happens.”

[Recipe: Granola Wedges](#)

Set a menu. About three years ago, Maag developed a weekly menu: muffins on Monday, French toast on Tuesday, waffles on Wednesday, cinnamon rolls on Thursday and pancakes on Friday.

She and her son used to argue over breakfast choices, and “I felt like it wasn’t a good use of time,” she said. “I work outside the home and the morning is busy for us, so I needed to do something to make it easier. I couldn’t even quantify [the difference it’s made]. We have zero conversations about what’s for breakfast.”

Having a routine has also helped her two children develop a rhythm and track time, Maag said. Her son, who is 7, knows that if he is having French toast that morning, for example, he has soccer practice that afternoon.

Eat breakfast yourself. Many parents skip breakfast, thinking they don’t have time or it will help them manage their weight, Lemond said. By eating breakfast, though, you are less likely to overeat later in the day and more likely to make healthful choices, she said.

“Breakfast sometimes gets shut out when we’re busy or we want to sleep later,” Lemond said. “Take 15 minutes out of your morning to get that vital nutrition in. Breakfast is the meal that [provides] a lot of the fiber and fruit that we need.”

Jill Castle, a registered dietitian and co-author of “[Fearless Feeding: How to Raise Healthy Eaters From High Chair to High School](#),” said making breakfast is less of a chore for parents if they are eating with their children.

“A lot of adults fly through that meal,” Castle said. “It becomes harder. If you were making dinner for everyone else and not eating, it would be a hard job.”

Assign jobs. Storch's two older boys have breakfast-related chores: Noah gets out the dry cereal, and Ezra serves the fruit. That frees her up to make one custom food for each child, whether it's scrambled eggs or a smoothie.

Lemond also gives her children food-preparation chores, such as mixing, pouring or using a chopping tool to cut ingredients. Her daughter Hannah, 9, is allowed [to cook bacon on the stove](#). Things go more smoothly when the kids help, Lemond said, and it teaches them to be self-sufficient. Parents might be inclined to do everything themselves because they can do it more quickly, but kids need to learn to plan and make meals.

“Being a parent is about training our children to be able to do things on their own also. That includes empowering them to make their own breakfast,” Lemond said. “Then, as they get older, they will be more inclined to pick healthy foods on their own.”

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