by pediatrician Dr. Alan Greene

In 2011 the USDA identified four key nutrients that are lacking in children's diets to such an extent they have become a public health concern: calcium, vitamin D, potassium, and fiber. Besides these big four, many other nutrients are commonly under-consumed as well, including folate, magnesium, vitamins A, C, K and healthy fats such as the omega-3s.[1]

A new school year provides a great opportunity to teach kids how to make nutritious choices throughout the day. Whether starting the morning off with organic milk or packing school lunches with lots of fruits and veggies, making a conscious choice to focus on nutrition as kids return to the classroom can help contribute to healthy habits for the long term. Here are a few easy ideas to get you started at the grocery store.

Back-To-School Top 10 List:

1. **Organic Milk:** With only 1 in 10 girls and 1 in 4 boys meeting their calcium needs,[2] it's important to keep calcium-rich foods front and center in kids' diets. Organic milk in single-serve boxes is a great choice for the lunchbox. It features vitamin D and provides potassium too (there's as much in one single-serve organic box as in a banana). Also look for milk fortified with DHA omega-3 – an important nutrient that helps support kids' brain health.[3] It tastes just like regular milk so kids love it in a glass or poured over whole-grain cereal.
2. **Whole Grains:** The new U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend that at least half of our grains be whole grains. Choosing whole grains for lunchbox sandwiches and wraps is a smart strategy to boost fiber and other important nutrients.
3. **String Cheese:** Cheese is a good source of calcium and protein, and convenient for snacks and lunches. It's an especially easy way to boost protein intake if your child isn't a meat eater.
4. **Trail Mix:** A variety of dried fruits (apricots, cherries, cranberries, raisins, dates), nuts (almonds, peanuts, walnuts, pistachios)[4] and cereal (look for those high in fiber and low in sugar) can combine into one hearty snack. Plus, you can make an activity out of letting your kids create their very own one-of-a-kind mix. Almonds and dates are a good source of fiber. Dried apricots are a good source of potassium.
5. **Nut Butter:** Peanut butter, almond butter, hazelnut butter – they're all great for lunchtime sandwiches or on toast for an after-school snack.[5]
6. **Hummus:** This protein-packed spread comes in a wide variety of flavors and even in single-serve packs for kids on the go. Try it as a dip for veggies and whole-grain crackers, or as a spread on wraps and sandwiches instead of mayonnaise or dressing.

7. **Granola Bars:** If chosen with care, granola bars can be a lower-in-sugar, high-fiber alternative to cookies and candy bars. Be sure to read labels and look for bars made with whole grains and 10 grams of sugar or less.
8. **Turkey Breast:** Turkey breast is low in fat and high in protein, and is generally popular even with picky eaters. Go ahead and get creative with turkey for after-school snacks – think turkey and cheese roll-ups.
9. **Fruit, Fruit, Fruit:** Apples, cherries, bananas, oranges, grapes – fruits are an important part of a well-balanced diet. Fruits are among the top sources of fiber, potassium, and many other under-consumed nutrients. Try to vary what you offer since different fruits provide different nutrients, and choose organic when you can.
10. **Veggies, Veggies, Veggies:** Veggies like carrot sticks, celery, cucumbers, pea pods and cherry tomatoes are all great for lunchboxes and after-school snacks. They are the rock stars of nutrient density. Remember, the darker the veggie, the more nutritious it tends to be–and organic is best when practical. To prevent veggie boredom, think about serving them with low fat salad dressing or hummus.

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010, 7th Edition.

2 Bailey RL et al. Estimation of Total Usual Calcium and Vitamin D intakes in the United States. J Nutr 2010; 140: 817-822.

3 National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine, Food and Nutrition Board. Dietary Reference Intakes for Energy, Carbohydrate, Fat, Fatty Acids, Cholesterol, Protein, and Amino Acids (Macronutrients) 2005. Chapter 8 – Dietary Fats, Total Fats and Fatty Acids. n-3 Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids, pages 439-440 and 443-447.

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4 For settings where nut allergies are not a concern.

5 Ibid.