

Some General Guidelines for Parents Buying Food

Having seen the results of Scout food purchases for over 10 years now, I have established the following general guidelines for parents supervising food-buying Scouts:

First off, you should not be preparing the menu; this is the Scout's job and your son should already have an approved menu in hand. If he doesn't, it's time to call his Patrol Leader - and if the situation still isn't resolved, his Patrol Assistant Scoutmaster. [If it still isn't resolved, call me.]

Second, please realize that (especially) for new Scouts, the exercise is as much a learning experience as a means for getting food for their Patrol. There is no question that parents can do a much faster and far more efficient job of buying food than their sons; however, we still want the Scouts to do the buying. Mom (or Dad's) job here is to:

1. supervise;
2. ensure that a proper menu has been planned and is being bought; and
3. most importantly, ensure that the Scouts realize the "totality" of what goes into a final product (for example, that pancakes require add-water-only pancake mix, cooking oil, butter and syrup, or that cheeseburgers require patties, cheese, buns, condiments, charcoal and lighter fluid and a grill). Remember, if you always do it all, you'll always have to do it all - if you teach them how, eventually you'll only have to provide transportation and supervision.

Finally, regarding the menu and actual food purchases, there are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Do not emphasize buying "healthy" foods - it will come back uneaten. This is a major problem with some moms. Point: I am far happier with the Scouts devouring every last Count Chocula, donut and cookie rather than barely nibbling on scads of orange slices, celery sticks and cream of wheat. I've seen the latter situation far too many times. Having Scouts well-fed on "unhealthy" food is far preferable to having them go hungry `cause they don't like the "healthy" choices arbitrarily forced on them by parents. In any case, "healthy" food often ends up in the trash while the more prepared Scouts dig hidden reserves of candy bars out of their packs. Yes, Froot-Loops, Doritos and Marshmallows are not a great diet, but it's not going to kill them to oink out for a day or two; don't buy healthy, buy what they'll eat.
2. Having said that, please buy quality variants, not the cheapest stuff available. For example, buy deli meats vs. perpetually preserved Oscar Meyer slices. Get thick, whole grain vs plain white bread. Get "real" cookies rather than the el-cheapo "family-size" mish-mash of tasteless, unidentifiable circles and squares. Get real orange juice vs. Tang or other "orange-flavored" drinks. Etc., etc., etc. In my experience, the price differences between buying the best vs. the cheapest is only a couple of bucks per Scout, but the differences in the quality (edibility and taste) of the final product is quite significant.

3. Next, when considering alternate meal choices, go with the more convenient variants if possible - go ahead and buy the pre- prepared frozen burger patties over a huge hunk of frozen ground round. Take the add-water-only pancake mix vs. the type that requires addition of butter and eggs. For "car-camping," get the gallon jugs of already prepared fruit drink rather than powdered mix. Etc., etc., etc. Anything that saves significant amounts of preparation time is always very useful for us - unlike many Troops, cooking, eating and cleaning are only minor aspects of our weekend programs.
4. Finally, don't overbuy! This is probably the most common problem I observe; please remember you're buying for boys - hungry boys, yes - but boys nonetheless. We always seem to bring back gallons upon gallons of milk and orange juice, excessive leftover bread, condiments, cereals, oatmeal, etc. - Note that we do control food output to make sure no-one at the end of the line goes hungry. Know the number of Scouts/Adults in the patrol, think about how much an average boy would eat at home, multiply by about 1.5 and the number of Scouts/Adults, and go for it - it'll be more than enough. If you really feel that there's just not enough food for a specific meal, buy an additional different complementary item rather than just more of the same thing (for example, a box of Nutra-Grain Bars or Donuts for what looks to you like a too skimpy breakfast - not another box of pancake mix).

Questions, please call me. Thanks for taking the time to act as a parental food monitor. It's an important behind the scenes job that critical for successful camping events.

- Dr. Bob