

Planning School Lunches

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Danielle Summers, Extension Agent II, Leon County Extension Service—Family & Consumer Sciences

With the second half of the school year off to a good start, do you find yourself preparing the same lunches over and over again for your child? Take some time to refocus. Revive school lunches, and help your child stop singing the lunch-time blues.

Children's tastes and preferences are always changing. Spend a few minutes talking with your child about his favorite lunchtime meals. Ask if there are any specific foods he would like to have or if there are some he doesn't want anymore. For example, macaroni and cheese used to be a hit in my child's lunchbox. Suddenly, the thermos came home full a couple times. By asking, I learned that it's not as "cheesy" (creamy) at lunch time as when it is first prepared, making it less appealing.

As you think about what to put in your child's lunch, consider what obstacles children face during lunch time. School lunch periods are often short on time. Recently, I had the opportunity to visit a school cafeteria during lunch. Children must find their seat, open lunch boxes and prepare their food, eat, socialize and clean up in just a small window of time. Make things simple for your child by sending one main item with a few small side items, such as spaghetti, applesauce and pudding. Or, you can send several small items to create a "buffet" effect for your child. This might include carrot sticks, crackers, grapes, and ham and cheese cubes

Another lunchtime consideration is how much children actually eat. Children's tummies are smaller than adults. They don't need as much food at one time to become full. However, they need to have foods packed with nutrition to help them through the rest of the school day without becoming hungry before their after-school snack. Include nutrient-dense foods, or foods that provide high nutrient levels and low calorie levels. For example, a medium orange is nutrient dense. It provides about 65 calories, 12 grams sugar, 0 milligrams sodium, and over 60 milligrams vitamin C. A candy bar has approximately 250 calories, 36 grams sugar, 144 milligrams sodium and 0.6 milligrams vitamin C. The candy bar is high in calories, but has low levels of nutrients, making it a poor choice.

Do you get confused by food items that your child can't eat enough of when at home, yet they keep coming home from school uneaten? Ask your child why she isn't eating them during lunch. You might find that you are packing more food than your child has time to eat. Your child might not like that particular food for lunch. It could be as simple as the container. Maybe it's too difficult for your child to open. Or maybe the child prefers to have a resealable container. I learned that the single-serve containers with foil seals were not a good choice for morning snacks. If there was any food left over, it couldn't be saved for lunch because there wasn't a lid. Now, I put everything in resealable containers.

Do you find you just don't have enough time to prepare the lunch you would like for your child? Eliminate time as a barrier by planning ahead. Use dinner time to prepare for lunch. Cook larger amounts of dinner items that can be served for lunch the next day. (This works great for your own lunch too.) If you don't want to serve leftovers for tomorrow's lunch, divide food into single-sized portions and freeze for later. While cleaning up after dinner, do as much lunch time preparation as

possible. Set out non-perishable items, including napkins, utensils and lunchboxes. Group perishable items together in the refrigerator for quick morning packing.

Planning ahead helps ensure your child receives a variety of healthy foods. Communicating with your child and involving him in preparation are key elements to lunches that your child will like and eat. Keep your child involved in the lunch process. Teach healthy food habits to students today for healthy graduates in the future.

Simple, Tasty Ideas for the Lunch Box

- Whole strawberries and chocolate pudding
- Tortilla chips and salsa
- Whole wheat crackers with cheese slices or peanut butter
- Ham and cheese kabobs (served on toothpicks)
- Baby carrots or celery sticks and ranch dressing
- Popcorn
- Blueberries and cantaloupe pieces
- Granola bar
- Graham crackers and applesauce
- Cottage cheese with fruit pieces
- Apple slices and peanut butter
- Raisins
- Grapefruit sections or wedges
- Broccoli and cherry tomatoes with dressing for dipping
- Pita bread with tuna or chicken salad
- Cold pizza