

School Lunches

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Lunchtime is a very exciting time during the school day. It is also very important in that it provides children with the nutrition and energy they need for a successful afternoon at school. However, for parents, preparing lunches is often thought of as a mundane task. This school year, think outside the box, and strive to make lunch more than just a sandwich and chips.

The main goal in preparing lunch is choosing something that will be eaten, rather than traded or thrown away. However, it is also important to make healthy lunches as you are building a foundation for healthy eating habits. So, how do you accomplish both?

What works well in my household is involving my child in all stages of the lunch-making process: planning, shopping and preparing. When children take part in the process, they are more likely to eat and enjoy the foods in their lunch. Begin by planning ahead. This is critical to staying out of the sandwich rut. I sit down with my child and make a list of favorite foods to eat for lunch. Then, I divide the list into food groups. You could also divide it into main dishes, side dishes, snacks and drinks. Here are some suggestions that you might include:

Grains	Whole wheat, rye, raisin bread
	Bagel (regular or miniature)
	English muffin
	Pita bread (regular or miniature)
	Whole wheat crackers
	Tortillas
	Rolls
	Trail mix
	Whole grain cereal
	Graham crackers
	Granola bars
	Popcorn
	Pretzels (vary the shape)
	Rice cakes (regular or miniature)
Milk	String cheese
	Low fat/fat free milk
	Cheese cubes
	Yogurt
	Cottage cheese

	pudding
Meat & Beans	Lean sliced turkey or ham
	Hard-boiled egg
	Peanut butter
	Chicken drumstick
	Tuna or chicken salad
	Nuts
Fruit	Grapes
	Bananas
	Unsweetened applesauce
	Melon cubes or balls
	Raisins and other dried fruit
	Apples
	100% fruit juice
	Orange wedges
	Kiwi
	Pineapple
	Berries
Peaches and nectarines	
Vegetables	Carrots (baby, shredded, coins)
	Celery
	Broccoli
	Cauliflower
	Sugar snap peas
	Cucumber spears
	Cherry tomatoes

Once you have determined which foods your child likes that will also make good choices for lunch, use the chart to plan the week's lunch menu. Try to include foods from at least four of the food groups each day. Plan for a variety of foods throughout the week. If you are thinking about including a new food, try it at home first to make certain your child will eat it. You wouldn't want to send something they don't like or won't eat resulting in them skipping lunch that day.

Once you have planned the menu, you are ready to go shopping. Take your child to the store with you to help make selections. My child enjoys choosing fruits and soups and looks forward to carrying them in her lunch box.

Once the planning and shopping are complete, have children help prepare their lunches. Younger children can wash fruits or vegetables, select items from the pantry or assist with making sandwiches while older children will be able to help even more.

For younger children, add excitement to lunch by placing a sticker on the outside of sandwich bags or food containers or adding a holiday napkin. Include a short note to let children know you're thinking about them. Use cookie cutters to cut sandwiches and other foods into seasonal shapes for added lunch fun. One of our favorites is gingerbread men cheese slices with crackers during wintertime. Be sensitive to your child's age when considering little surprises as middle schoolers and teens might be embarrassed by these items.

It can be several hours from the time you prepare lunch at home until it is actually eaten at school. Pack lunches in insulated bags or lunch boxes. Keep cold foods cold by including a reusable ice pack or frozen juice box. When serving hot foods such as macaroni and cheese or soup, use a thermos. Fill the thermos with steaming hot water, not boiling, and let stand for about five minutes. Empty the water, fill thermos with steaming hot food and seal. When your child eats lunch, they will be able to enjoy a hot meal. Discard any uneaten foods after lunch and clean lunch boxes and bags daily with warm soapy water.

Taking a little bit of time to plan ahead can save a lot of time and make great nutritious strides in the long run. You can feel confident your child has a healthy lunch filled with a variety of foods that your child will eat and not trade with others.