

Making the Grade at Lunchtime

Breakfast is often called the most important meal of the day, but lunch also plays a critical role in children's overall health and school performance. When children skip lunch, they are likely to have difficulty concentrating in the classroom, lack energy for sports and overeat on low-nutrient, after-school snacks.

Whether children eat lunch at home, enjoy a school-provided lunch or pack a lunch box, the goal is a nutrient-rich meal to fuel their brains and bodies for the afternoon. The trick is providing a lunch that has a nutritional punch and appeals to your child. Try the following ideas to create lunches your child will eat rather than trade, throw away or bring back home.

Put Your Kids in the Chef's Seat

When kids help plan their lunches, they are much more likely to eat them. If your child's school has a lunch program, review the menus together and pick the ones he or she enjoys. When kids eat school lunch they are more likely to consume milk, meats, grains and vegetables, which gives them a higher nutrient intake over the course of an entire day. Cost- and nutrition-wise, school lunch is a great value.

If your child is more likely to eat a lunch packed at home, create a system that works for both of you on what goes into every lunch: some protein, a grain, at least one fruit and veggie, a dairy product (or buy milk at school) and an optional small sweet or snack item. Make a checklist or spreadsheet of your child's likes in each category. For example: "The vegetables I will eat in my lunch are: baby carrots, green pepper slices with ranch dip, cherry tomatoes or a mini-salad."

Make a specific plan for the next week. Take time on the weekend to bag items for each day. Some families have baskets in the fridge and on the counter so everything (except sandwiches) can be prepared ahead of time.

Go for Gold Medal Food Choices

Variety is the basis of well-balanced nutrition. But don't worry if a child wants exactly the same lunch two weeks in a row. He or she will probably change to something else before long. Work around your child's pickiness by creating a list of alternatives. For example, if sandwiches are in the "don't like" column, what else might work?

- Wraps (which now come in variety of colors and flavors)
- Cracker sandwiches (usual ingredients on round or square crackers)
- Little salads with protein (cheese, nuts, beans)
- Bread-free sandwiches, like a slice of lunch meat wrapped around a cheese stick.

Focus on Eye-Appeal

Kids, like adults, eat with their eyes first. They are attracted to foods by the packaging, so make sure your lunch can compete. Choose a reusable lunch bag or box with favorite cartoon characters or colors. Make the foods as bright and colorful as possible. Have fun with shapes (use cookie cutters on sandwiches) and textures (make mini-muffins).