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## Making the Grade at Lunchtime



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Breakfast often is called the most important meal of the day, and lunch also plays a critical role in children's overall health and school performance. When children skip lunch, they are likely to have trouble 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 packs 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 more likely to eat them. If your child's school has a lunch program, review the menus together and pick the ones that are appealing. 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. Agree on what goes into every lunch: some protein, a grain, at least one fruit and one veggie, a calcium-rich food or beverage (if not buying milk at school) and perhaps a small sweet or additional snack item. Make a checklist or spreadsheet of what your child 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 for two weeks in a row. Work around normal 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 whole-grain crackers)
- Little salads with protein (cheese, nuts, beans)
- Bread-free sandwiches (such as a slice of turkey or roast beef wrapped around a cheese stick and crunchy slice of sweet bell pepper)

### *Make Fruits and Veggies Fun*

Variety in fruits and vegetables keeps them exciting. Lunch boxes with sections make it easy to include more choices without fear that they'll be squished.

- Fruit kabobs can be made with your child's help by combining pineapple or kiwi chunks, strawberries, watermelon or cantaloupe chunks, and orange segments. These are deliciously sweet plain, or add a small container of plain yogurt with a little cinnamon.
- Vegetables make fun kabobs, too. Cucumbers, zucchini and cherry tomatoes are good together, and also are delicious to dip in a small container of hummus.
- Other vegetables made for dipping include raw carrots (strips or baby-cut carrots for convenience) and celery sticks. As a make-ahead, trim and steam some green beans to have ready or steam some broccoli florets; both also are fun to dip in hummus or salsa.
- For convenient packing and eating, add a package of unsweetened applesauce, or one of the small seedless, easy-peel oranges like a clementine or mandarin).
- Make a quick pasta salad. Combine cooked pasta (bowtie, penne, orzo, or whatever shape your child likes) with edamame or white beans, a vegetable of choice, and some pesto or homemade ranch dressing (half plain yogurt, half mayonnaise).
- If sandwiches are a top choice, use them as a vehicle to include a vegetable like a handful of shredded carrots, sliced peppers or some lettuce or baby spinach.

### *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 foods as bright and colorful as possible. Have fun with shapes and size — use cookie cutters on sandwiches or make mini-muffins.