

Preparing an A-okay school lunch for your kids

Food for Thought

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As kids prepare to head back to the classroom, many parents are already dreading the challenge of packing a lunch their child will like and eat so it doesn't wind up traded for junk food or tossed in the trash.

Having the right foods for lunch will help fuel growing kids through their busy school day; kids who are nutritionally fit are more likely to have the energy and stamina they need to perform well in the classroom and on the sports field.

A healthy and balanced lunch should include building blocks from all four food groups to help sustain a child's energy and alertness throughout the day.

Lunch should offer whole grains (carbohydrate) for energy, protein to help slow digestion and keep kids feeling full longer, fruits and vegetables for vitamins, a milk product for calcium and extra protein, a drink for hydration and an optional dessert. (Parents who are keeping an eye on their child's weight might want to skip the dessert.)

But the nutritious lunch that's packed isn't always the one that's eaten. And if the sandwich on whole-wheat bread or the juicy green apple is regularly traded for candy, cookies or chips, your child might not be reaping the benefits of a well-balanced school lunch.

According to U.S. research, almost half of children surveyed said they traded lunch items at least once or twice a week, and nearly 10 per cent traded every day. Asked why they swapped foods with their friends, most said they didn't like their own lunch or

they were bored with the same items.

While there are no guarantees children will eat their packed lunch, there are some tips that might deter kids from trading.

Plan school lunches ahead of time, so that you have nutritious foods on hand that your kids will eat. Shop for bulk foods and, at home, pre-package snack-sized foods such as trail mix, air-popped popcorn, whole-grain crackers and cut-up vegetables.

Get your kids involved by including them in menu planning. If kids participate in making their lunch, they'll be more likely to eat it. Let them identify healthy foods they like from each food group. Discussions about lunches will allow you and your children to figure out compromises. Have your children help prepare their lunch the night before school for a less hectic morning.

Reduce portion size and increase variety to prevent boredom. While some kids take comfort in eating the same lunch day after day, others need variety to stay interested. Instead of a whole sandwich, pack half a sandwich along with crackers and low-fat cheese. When it comes to whole grains, think beyond bread. Try mini whole-wheat pita pockets, mini bagels, whole-grain crackers, whole-wheat tortillas or even leftover pasta salad. When cold weather hits, substitute the sandwich for a thermos filled with hearty soup, pasta or chili.

Getting children to eat vegetables and fruit may be the biggest challenge parents face when packing a school lunch. Bite-sized fruit and vegetables are often more appealing to kids (they're easier to eat). Pack cherry tomatoes, baby carrots, broccoli florets, red pepper strips or cucumber coins. Send along a small container of hummus or low-fat salad dressing for dipping. Instead of the usual apple or banana, try sliced fruit (add a little lemon juice to prevent



Jackie Agnew and her sons, Evan and Andrew, prepare a healthy lunch at their home in Niagara Falls, Ont.

browning), grapes, berries or raisins. If fresh fruit gets boring, try individual fruit cups (canned in 100-per-cent juice or water) or dried fruit bars such as Sun-Rype Fruit to Go or ReBar Organic Food

Bars. Sugary fruit drinks and punches don't count as fruit. Choose unsweetened fruit juice boxes and limit your child's intake to 250 ml (1 cup) per day. To help growing kids meet their daily cal-

cium needs, pack a single serving of low-fat yogurt (less than 2 per cent milk fat), a low-fat yogurt tube, part-skim cheese strings, or a 250-ml carton of low-fat milk, chocolate milk, or calcium forti-

fied rice or soy beverage.

Pack snacks for morning recess and after school. Growing kids need to refuel every two to three hours to keep their blood sugar levels stable. A sustained blood sugar means kids will have more energy to concentrate in class and participate in after school sports. Low-fat granola bars, popcorn, dried fruit, homemade trail mix, cheese and crackers or yogurt drinks are a few examples.

Pack a weekly treat. Treats like Fruit Roll-Ups, Oreo cookies and potato chips don't need to be avoided completely, but they shouldn't be an everyday offering.

However, there are some packaged treats that don't make the grade. Schneiders Lunch Mate Cheesy Chip Nachos Combo contains nacho chips, processed cheese dip, Nerds candy, Fudge-O cookies and orange punch — all for a whopping 750 calories, 33 grams of fat (one-third of it from saturated plus trans fat) and 55 grams of sugar (almost 14 teaspoons worth).

Better, but still not great, are Schneiders Lifestyle Smart Lunches combos. The Smart Lunch Pizza Combo serves up pepperoni pizza, Sun-Rype 100 per cent fruit juice and sour candies for 460 calories, 16 grams of fat (half of it saturated) and 30 grams of sugar. But there are also 1,210 milligrams of sodium, half the upper limit for kids and teenagers. Not that smart after all.

Lunch-box safety is just as important as good nutrition. Pack foods in an insulated lunch bag or lunch box. Keep cold foods cold by packing a freezer gel pack or a frozen juice box, milk container or yogurt tube. Pour hot foods like soup, pasta and chili into a pre-heated insulated thermos.

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