

Plan a Nutritious School Lunch

Jordan Luxa, Extension Educator (jordan.luxa@unl.edu), MS, RD, LMNT

Back to school season is here and it's time to start thinking about school lunch. School lunches are designed to provide healthy food options for children. Whether your child enjoys school lunch, or you decide to pack your child's lunch instead, it is important they are provided with a nutrient packed meal that will fuel their bodies and brains. Below are tips on how to pack a nutritious lunch.

- **Plan ahead.** It is often helpful to take the time to make school lunches the night before. Cut up your fruits and vegetables at the beginning of the week and separate them into single-serve containers. Keep a variety of individual snack packages (fruit cups, pretzels, popcorn, crackers, etc.) in a designated container so that they are easy to grab and add to lunches.
- **Get your kids involved.** When kids play a role in the planning and preparing of lunches, they are more likely to eat them. Give them age-appropriate tasks such as retrieving and putting items away, washing fruit and vegetables, using cookie cutters to make fun sandwich shapes, and putting the food into their lunch box. Agree on what goes into every lunch. Make a checklist 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."
- **Include each food group.** In order to get a variety of nutrients, it is important to include all five food groups. Eating a variety of food from each food group supplies protein, fat, and carbohydrates. These nutrients give your child the energy to keep up throughout the day and during after-school activities.
 - Fruit and veggies: fresh, frozen, canned, or dried
 - Dairy: milk, yogurt, cheese
 - Grains: whole wheat bread, English muffin, crackers, tortilla wrap, pita, pasta
 - Protein: baked chicken, deli meat, hard boiled eggs, cottage cheese, beans, nut butters
- **Invest in a fun lunch box.** Compartment lunch boxes help to cut back on the number of plastic bags used, they separate food and help with portion sizes. Reusable baking cups are another fantastic way to separate foods if you are using a larger container. Insulated lunch containers work best to keep cold foods cold. Keep an insulated thermos on hand to send warm foods such as soups and leftovers. Ensure the lunch box and any reusable containers are cleaned out at the end of each day.
- **Have fun.** Get creative by using cookie cutters to make different shapes out of bread, deli-meat, or cheese. Try slicing fruit or using a melon-baller. Use kid-friendly skewers to make kabobs lined with cherry tomatoes, pickles, cheese cubes, and turkey. Brighten your child's day by putting a note in their lunch with words of encouragement.



Sources:

1. Get to Know Your School Lunch Program, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: <https://bit.ly/3ha9OUD>
2. School Lunches: Helping Your Child Make Healthy Choices (2020), Familydoctor.org: <https://bit.ly/317ZmHJ>