

## Healthy Lunches Promote Alertness and Productivity: What's Your Child Eating for Lunch?

By Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

Parents are fundamental contributors to their child's success. Whether you pack your child's lunch or purchase it from school, it is important to monitor nutritional choices. Lunch provides the energy necessary to continue learning through the rest of the school day.



Lunch time at school is a social event as well as a nutritional refueling. Children become preoccupied with the conversation at the table or inhale their lunches so they may hurry out to recess. Providing kids with foods that are convenient, enjoyable, and "cool" to eat help create an unconscious habit of healthy eating. Here are a few suggestions to make lunch inviting and enjoyable.

### Tips for Packing Healthy Home Lunches for School

- Involve your child in choosing and preparing foods he/she may take for lunch. He/she will most likely eat what he/she can choose and not give it away or throw it out.
- Plan ahead with your child and think about the lunches you can prepare for the week. Buy the ingredients when you do your regular shopping.
- Know your child's tastes. If he/she'll eat anything, give him/her lots of variety within the food pyramid guidelines. If your child chooses to eat the same thing every day, don't worry too much about it. Just make sure that the lunch is nutritious and well-rounded.
- Use fewer prepackaged foods because of their higher fat, salt, and sugar content. If you choose prepared foods, like crackers and different cheeses, supplement them with fresh fruits, crunchy vegetables, and containers of low-fat dip. Add crunch to lunch with other choices besides chips. Try packing nuts, trail mix, or popcorn. If chips are a favorite, try the baked variety.
- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Freeze juice boxes (look for 100% juice), small bottles of water, or small cartons of milk to help keep foods fresh until lunch. The drink will thaw before lunch and be ready for drinking. Thermos® products will ensure that hot foods remain at a constant temperature. (\*Do not freeze aluminum cans of soda! They will explode in your freezer, and besides, they are not a healthy choice.)
- Be creative with packaging by using colorful, theme napkins, stickers to seal sandwiches and brown bags, and sending coded messages on occasion to add to the conversation at the lunch table.

- If preparing lunches the night before, store perishable foods in the refrigerator overnight.
- If using a lunchbox, clean it out each day with hot, soapy water and dry it thoroughly before repacking. Clean Thermos® containers and air dry before reusing.



## Buying Lunches Prepared at School

Many schools today are preparing menus as far as a month in advance for students to take home to their parents. This is helpful in deciding which days your child may want to eat the prepared cafeteria food or bring lunch from home.

- If you are still unsure about the cafeteria selections, visit the cafeteria and share lunch with your child. Talk with your child about his/her school lunch choices.
- Schools differ in the preparation of their meals. Some schools may use privately owned enterprises or other institutional kitchens. All schools must use a *Nutrient Standard or Food Group* system to document the value of their meals for federal authorities. They must meet the standards outlined for them in “*Dietary Guidelines for Americans.*”
- Along with the prepared school lunches, many cafeterias now allow vending machines or provide additional snack items for purchase with no restrictions. Students are free to eat as much as they can buy. Discuss this with your child and encourage him/her to make extra snacks an occasional purchase.
- For many children, their school lunch will be the most important and nutritious meal of their day. Children depend on the hot lunch at school for 1/3 to 1/2 of their nutritional intake. Guide your child in making healthy choices on his/her own. Discuss the need for choosing from the different food groups wisely. Monitor choices by talking after school about what he/she chooses each day for lunch.

Whether your child takes lunch from home, or purchases it at school, the goal is the same—to create a habit of choosing healthy, nutritious foods to keep your child’s energy level going for the rest of the school day. Healthy lunches help children be alert and ready to learn. What is your child eating for lunch?

### Resources

Citizens for Healthy Options in Children’s Education - [www.choiceusa.net](http://www.choiceusa.net)

Women Today Magazine - [www.womentodaymagazine.com](http://www.womentodaymagazine.com)

KidsHealth - [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

Colorado State University Cooperative Extension - [www.ext.colostate.edu](http://www.ext.colostate.edu)