Mealtime Inspirations

Quick Tips 2016

Tips for Packing a Healthy School Lunch
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Packing lunches for your children is no easy task. It takes time and planning. Plus, every parent knows that just because you pack it, doesn’t guarantee your kids will actually eat it.

However, this doesn’t mean you have to fill your kids’ lunchboxes with pizza and cookies every day. Here are some tips for how to pack a nutritious lunch that your kids will look forward to eating and you’ll feel good about giving them.

**Make a Smarter Sandwich**

While some kids prefer the same thing every day, others may be OK with a slight switch to their sandwich.

- Use different breads like 100% whole-wheat tortilla wraps, 100% whole-wheat pita pockets, mini 100% whole wheat bagel.
- In addition to lettuce and tomato, try shredded carrot or zucchini and sliced apple or pear.
- Try avocado or hummus as a swap for cheese or mayo.
- Use a leftover grilled chicken in their sandwich as a switch for lunch meat.
- Have fun with sandwiches, too. Cut them into “sushi,” by rolling, slicing, and portioning sandwiches into individual bites.

**Go Beyond the Basics**

While it might be tempting to stick to sandwiches, they can quickly lose their appeal. Instead, experiment with new foods.

- Protein-packed kebobs
- Pasta salad
- Baked whole-grain tortilla chips to scoop up salmon or tuna
- Breakfast for lunch
  - Whole-grain pancakes - Layer peanut butter between two pancakes. Vary the pancake flavors (pumpkin, banana-blueberry, gingerbread).
  - Smoothies – Make ahead and freeze in plastic freezer jars. They will thaw by lunch time.

**Play with Presentation**

A few simple tweaks in prepping and packaging can encourage choosy kids to give new foods a try. Because lunchtime is social and kids are often distracted, the easier the foods are to eat, the better.

- Bite-sized foods work well packed into Bento-style lunchboxes, and fun, frilly toothpicks can be packed with small cubes of fruit and cheese. Protein, fruits, and veggies look great on a skewer.
- Use cookie cutters to make foods fun shapes.
- Make their lunch into food art like their favorite cartoon characters or things from nature.
- Pack brightly-colored produce, such as raspberries and cherry tomatoes, to add a visual pop of color to a lunchbox as well.

**Love Those Leftovers**

Think about using the leftovers from a family favorite dinner for a next day’s lunch. Use a thermos to keep foods hot or cold until the lunch bell rings. Some ideas:

- Soup
- Chili
- Spaghetti
- Bean casserole or beans & rice
Let Them Dunk
Sometimes it’s OK to let your kids play with their food, especially when they are getting extra nutrition. Try packing one of these fun dunks with dippers:

- Fruit (apple, pear, etc.) slices to dip into yogurt or peanut butter.
- Vegetable (carrot, celery, sweet pepper, etc.) strips to dip into hummus, cottage cheese, guacamole, fresh salsa or homemade bean dip.
- Whole-grain crackers or slices of grilled tofu (a soybean product) to dunk into soup.
- Mini whole grain pancakes to dunk in syrup and/or whipped cream.

Take Time with New Foods
If your child refuses to eat certain foods, it can be hard to know when to keep trying and when give up. Studies have shown kids can come around after repeated exposure—but it’s not a fool-proof solution. While it may be true for many kids with many foods, it’s not true for all kids with all foods.

Put a small amount of a new food in a lunchbox, and continue to reintroduce it on and off for several weeks. If at the end they still don’t like it, switch it up to something in the same food family. For instance, if they don’t like kale, give them rainbow chard or spinach chips (drizzle spinach with olive oil and bake until crisp), or even sugar snaps or edamame.

Make Snacks at Home
Kids rely on snacks to keep their energy up, but the type of snack is important to consider. Packaged snacks tend to lack important nutrients and can be high in sugar, sodium and saturated fats. Take control of what is in your kids’ snacks by making them yourself! Here are some examples: homemade granola bars, no bake energy bites, ants on a log.

If you go the store-bought route, stick to fruits, nuts, and items with small ingredient lists. Good options include baked pita chips, almonds and walnuts, low-sugar granola, yogurts with low sugar content, grapes, bananas, and the like. Dark chocolate is a great daily treat.

Get Them Involved
When kids help pack their lunch, they’re more likely to eat that lunch! On nights you have a bit more time, have them help you assemble their lunch. Make this a nightly or weekly routine – it’s another great way to spend family time together.

Have a list of options for them to pack for their lunches. Give easy food options for them to prepare. This gives them the opportunity to make food choices within healthy parameters. Consider using containers to organize your fridge and pantry with healthy lunch choices.
Homemade Granola Bars

Yield: About 10 depending on how you slice them

Ingredients

2 1/2 cups old fashioned rolled oats
1/2 cup whole almonds, roughly chopped
1/3 cup honey
1/4 cup unsalted butter
1/4 cup dark brown sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon chia seeds
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
1/4 cup dried cranberries, coarsely chopped
1/4 cup dried golden raisins, coarsely chopped
1/4 cup mini chocolate chips, plus extra as needed

Instructions

Heat oven to 350 degrees F. Line bottom of a 9-inch square pan with parchment paper. Then lightly spray the parchment with cooking spray.

Combine the oats and roughly chopped almonds to a small baking sheet then bake 7-10 minutes until lightly toasted. Transfer to a large bowl.

While the oats are toasting, combine the butter, honey, brown sugar, vanilla extract seeds, chia and salt in a small saucepan over medium heat. Cook until butter melts and the sugar completely dissolves, making sure to stir occasionally. Pour the butter mixture over the toasted oats and almonds and add the cranberries and golden raisins. Mix well. Let cool for 15 minutes then add the mini chocolate chips. Stir to combine.

Transfer the oat mixture to prepared pan. Using a rubber spatula firmly press the mixture into the pan until the mixture is in a uniform layer. Scatter remaining a few extra tablespoons of mini chocolate chips over the granola bars and use the same rubber spatula to gently press them into the granola so they stick. Transfer the entire pan to the refrigerator and chill for 2 hours.

After the granola, has cooled completely, gently lift it out of the pan using the parchment paper as handles and cut it into squares or bars. Serve as needed.

This recipe is from What’s Gaby Cooking (http://whatsgabycooking.com/homemade-granola-bars/)
No Bake Energy Bites

Yield: About 20-25
Prep Time: 10 Mins

Ingredients:

1 cup old fashioned oats
2/3 cup toasted coconut flakes
1/2 cup peanut butter
1/2 cup ground flax seed
1/2 cup semisweet chocolate chips
1/3 cup honey or agave nectar
1 tablespoon chia seeds (optional)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Directions:

Stir all ingredients together in a medium bowl until thoroughly mixed. Cover and let chill in the refrigerator for half an hour.*

Once chilled, roll into balls of whatever size you would like.

Store in an airtight container and keep refrigerated for up to 1 week.

*Prep time listed does not include time for the mixture to chill. To speed up the chilling, try spreading the mixture out on a baking sheet, then covering it with plastic wrap and refrigerating.

This recipe is from Gimme Some Oven (http://www.gimmesomeoven.com/no-bake-energy-bites/)