

10 Tips to Quickly Creating a Healthy Lunch, Your Child Will Eat

(by Lisa Barnes, owner of Petit Appetit and author of the new children's food cookbook *Petit Appetit: Eat, Drink and Be Merry*)

Getting everyone out the door, dressed, teeth brushed, and lunches packed in time for school (or grandmas or daycare) can be a real challenge. Often times packing a lunch is an afterthought. Some parents reach for easy items that are prepackaged and marketed for children, but these contain empty calories with little nutrition. Your child will feel better and have more energy and focus during the day when eating nutritious whole foods, rather than processed snacks filled with additives and preservatives. A banana is just as easy to grab as a bag of chips, and it comes in its own compostable wrapper.

Here are a few tips to create healthy lunches you and your child will feel good about...

1. Know the rules. Be mindful of school policies regarding food and waste. Many classrooms are "nut free" due to potential allergies, and some are kosher based on school philosophies. A growing number of schools are becoming "waste free", meaning a lunch that generates no garbage.
2. Let your child choose his lunch box or bag. Give options of those that are safe (PVC, lead free) and allow him to pick. Children are more excited when they are proud of their lunch boxes and will remember to bring it home.
3. Ask your child what he likes in his lunch. You can take him shopping and let him choose the fruit and kind of bread or spreads he likes. Sit with your child and plan the week of food items. Getting your child involved and giving choices empowers your child.
4. Organize the lunch gear. Have a place in your kitchen where you can have all of the boxes, bags, napkins, storage and drink containers in one place so you can find what you need easily.
5. Stock and organize the refrigerator and pantry with healthy options. Be sure to always have a variety of fresh fruit and veggies, whole grain breads, healthy spreads, cheeses, and drinks that you can choose, or create easily. Designating an organized area for lunch and snack food items in your refrigerator and pantry, allows you to see and grab quickly.
6. Read labels. Some pre-packaged foods are better than others. Items such as cheese sticks and unsweetened applesauce can be quick and healthy options. Choose items without unhealthy ingredients such as trans fats, high fructose corn syrups, additives and preservatives.
7. Offer variety, but not too much food. Remember portion control. Do not overwhelm children with too much food. Seeing various colors and textures is exciting for children and also means they're getting a variety of nutrients and vitamins.
8. Reinvent left-overs. Dinner's left-overs can be packed while cleaning up the night before so you're ready for school in the morning. Put a new twist or spin to make it appealing. Tortellini from dinner can be put on a popsicle stick and packed with sauce, or grilled chicken can be wrapped in a tortilla.
9. Prepack and prep when you have time. Many parents do not have lots of time to prepare the lunch in the morning. If you have time in the evening use it to cut and clean fruit and veggies, prepare dips, portion servings and make a sandwich or wrap.

10. Provide a "treat". Everyone likes to see something special and have something to look forward to. Whether it's a cookie you and your child baked together, favorite trail mix, a sticker, a picture, or a silly note it can remind your child of home.