



# Mixing up the Brown Bag Lunch: Packing lunches your littles will want to eat

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Lunch is a nice break from the work and play happening at school. It is also a valuable time for children to refuel for the rest of the day. Children who eat a variety of nutritious foods throughout each day often do better with tasks that require attention and higher-level brain functions like memory and regulating emotions. Packing lunches is one way to provide children a variety of nutrients with familiar and new foods, and may share a sense of share a sense of comfort in the middle of the day knowing it came from you.

Investing a little effort in planning can go a long way in saving time, money, and energy. Putting some thought into what you pack may impact their energy levels for the rest of the day. The long-lasting energy of a balanced lunch can help children concentrate and thrive in the second half of the day. Most importantly, we want them to eat what we pack. Follow along for ideas on planning and packing delicious and nutritious lunches that children will want to eat to support their growing minds and bodies.

## Planning

Whether you are just starting to pack lunches or are looking for ways to mix it up, take some time to think through the process of lunch.

*Where is lunch stored before they eat it?* Where children store their lunch will determine the types of food you can safely pack and the packing supplies you need. If lunch will be stored in a cubby, locker, or classroom, an insulated lunch box with two cold sources will allow perishable foods (like a turkey sandwich, cheese stick, or leftovers) to stay cool until it is time to enjoy. These cold sources can be traditional ice packs (no smaller than 5.3 inches) or a frozen juice box or frozen bottle of water. These cold sources should sandwich the perishable items to help keep them cold.

### Ready to invest? Consider some of these supplies for packing lunch.

- Insulated lunch box
- Reusable containers
- Insulated containers
- Reusable water bottle
- Ice packs
- Reusable utensils and straws
- Napkins

*Figure 1. Reusable lunch box supplies*


*What supplies do you need to pack lunch?* Once you know where food will be stored until lunchtime, it is time to get the packing supplies. You may be able to repurpose clean, food-safe bags or containers around the house. Or you may need to invest in new bags or containers to safely pack a variety of foods. Figure 1 provides ideas of packing supplies that allow you to pack more options, hot and cold. Next, it is important to consider some limits of lunch.


- *What time is lunch?* Lunchtime may be early or later in the day. With early lunches, frozen foods may not have time to thaw. With later lunches, they might need a snack to bridge the gap between breakfast and lunch.
- *How long is lunchtime?* The lunch period may be as short as 20 minutes. With short lunch periods, it is helpful to send foods that do not require preparation and that are easy to eat. For example, soup or salad may take longer to eat than cheese and crackers or a sandwich.
- *Is the school nut-free?* Because of the increasing number of children who have food allergies and potentially serious outcomes, some schools do not allow peanuts or tree nuts. Examples of tree nuts include almonds, cashews, and pecans. If school is nut-free, try alternatives like sunflower or soy nut butter.
- *Can children open packages?* Whether you pack reusable containers or pre-packaged items, make sure children can open them. If not, you can either pre-open packages or put the food in something that is easier to open.
- *Is there access to a microwave?* Access to a microwave means you can send food your

child needs to heat up. If using a microwave to reheat leftovers, cover the food to hold in moisture and heat to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F. Cook frozen meals according to instructions on the package. If there is no microwave, make sure foods are ready and OK to eat as you packed them.

For the last part of the planning process, make a list. Keeping a list of simple staples can foster creative and structured lunch ideas. Create a list of five to 10 main dish ideas or ingredients you usually have on hand. You can use this over and over with the same or different ingredients. Additionally, serving familiar favorites in diverse ways gives children nutrition they need while also exposing them to new textures and flavors.

As an example, you may use a whole grain tortilla for a nut or seed butter and banana roll up one day and a bean and cheese quesadilla the next. Figure 2 provides examples of lunch staples you can combine in a variety of ways.


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# Lunch for Littles

## Lunch Ideas

Write down lunch ideas from foods identified on the Balance the Box Handout.  
Try to pair a colorful carbohydrate, powerful protein, and flavorful fat in each lunch!

|  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Whole grain tortillas</i> |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Carrots</i>               |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Ranch</i>                 |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Cheese</i>                |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Peanut butter</i>         |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Bananas</i>               |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Black beans</i>           |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> | <i>Unsalted pretzels</i>     |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> |                              |
| <input style="width: 40px; height: 40px; border: 2px solid red;" type="checkbox"/> |                              |
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*Figure 2. Lunch ideas list*

**Pro tip:** Including children in the planning process can encourage them to eat the food that is packed. Invite them to help make the list and with grocery shopping. This can provide time to find new foods to try and make sure they have something they will eat.

## Packing

Now that the plan is in place, it is time to get packing. With some guidance about what kinds of food to include, children can pack their own lunches. Consider laying out all the ingredients and guiding them through putting them together. For older children, you can provide a menu of what is for lunch. They can find and put everything together. See Table 2 for an example of a weekly menu with items listed. To give children even more independence, you can give them a checklist of nutritious options. Provide structure by telling them how many choices to pick from each category. Younger children will need help, but they will enjoy being part of the process.

When packing lunch, balance is key. A mix of protein, carbohydrates, and fats throughout the day fills children's bellies. It fuels their minds and bodies. It also helps regulate energy and emotions during the day. Even better, this combination is the recipe for a tasty lunch.

- **Protein Power.** Protein in the lunch box is key for helping children feel satisfied throughout the day. Protein foods include meat, poultry, fish, some dairy products, and plant sources like beans, peas, and lentils. Include food like a hard-boiled egg, beans, roasted turkey or chicken, nut or seed butter, yogurt, or cottage cheese.

- **Colorful carbohydrates.** Fruit and vegetables are a colorful way to add energy and flavor. They can be frozen, fresh, or canned. Whole grains are another great source of energy. These include foods like oats, brown rice, quinoa, popcorn, whole-grain pasta, bread, and crackers. These higher fiber carbohydrate choices will provide a steady release of energy. That keeps children energized throughout the day. Aim to add a whole grain and fruit or vegetable in lunch.
- **Flavorful fats.** Flavor makes food tasty to eat. Fat is one important part of flavor, and a little goes a long way. Fat is often included in many prepared dishes that use butter or oil. It is also found in many dairy products. Oils, dips, and dressings are great flavor boosters for fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The fat paired with these foods can help to absorb fat-soluble vitamins found in some carbohydrates. Nuts and seeds, cheese or yogurt, and avocado also have nutritious and delicious fat.





Table 2. Sample Weekly Lunch Menu

| Monday  | Tuesday  | Wednesday  | Thursday  | Friday   |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Turkey and cheese wraps, with nut butter and celery | Build your own pizza with naan (bread), pizza sauce, and your favorite toppings. Feature a fruit side with a yogurt dip. | Deconstructed taco bowl with rice, beans, tomatoes, and cheese | Yogurt parfait with granola and nuts                              | Chickpea pasta salad (noodles, chickpeas, crumbled cheese, chopped veggies, Italian dressing) with fruit cup |
| Protein: turkey and cheese                          | Protein: cheese, protein toppings like pepperoni and yogurt dip  | Protein: beans and cheese                                      | Protein: yogurt and nuts  | Protein: chickpeas and cheese  |
| Carbs: celery and whole-grain wrap                  | Carbs: naan, pizza sauce, vegetable toppings, fruit side   | Carbs: rice and tomatoes                                       | Carbs: fruit of choice – berries, pineapple, peaches, and granola | Carbs: whole-grain noodles, vegetables, fruit cup  |
| Fat: cheese and nut butter                          | Fat: cheese and yogurt dip   | Fat: cheese  | Fat: yogurt and nuts  | Fat: cheese and Italian dressing   |

To help make packing lunch feel less like a chore, try packing at your peak. If mornings are hectic, pack lunches the night before. If nights are for relaxing, build packing lunches into the morning routine. Does it work better to do everything at once? Take extra time on Sundays to pack lunches for the week. This makes it a grab-and-go in the morning, rather than a back-and-forth of figuring out what to pack.

Once you pack a delicious and nutritious lunch, check whether they need anything else. Children might need to pack a drink. Plain water is a terrific way for children to hydrate. They could also get milk at school. They might need a spoon or fork to easily eat what you packed. A napkin could help keep children clean or clean up messes. Lastly, remember at least two cold sources if anything needs to stay cool.



## Promoting the Food We Pack

Dust off your chef's hat and hang up the apron, the hard part is over. Or is it? Are lunches coming back mostly uneaten? Consider these ideas to add a little excitement to lunch boxes and to encourage children to eat.

- **Presentation matters.** A slight change to how you serve food might make a difference in what children eat. Food on a stick is fun. Put cubes or small balls of cheese or other protein along with vegetables and fruits on a stick with rounded edges, like a popsicle stick, or on unsalted pretzels. If it is not too much work, cut food into different shapes. Are sandwiches usually in squares? Try triangles. Cookie cutters are great for unique shapes and can make food more interesting. Lunch boxes that have divided containers make it easy for children to see what they have. It also prompts adults to pack a variety of food – something different in each spot.
- **Pops of color.** Children are more interested in plates, or lunches, that have many colors. To liven up the white or brown of a sandwich and chips, add at least one fruit or veggie. They come in every color of the rainbow – red strawberries, oranges, yellow peppers, green cucumbers, blueberries, purple grapes. Children will love the colors. The bonus is that each color provides special nutrients that help them grow and stay healthy.
- **Explore why foods come back uneaten.** Children's appetites vary. Some days they will be hungry. Other days they won't. If you notice a trend that lunches are coming back mostly uneaten, get curious. Did they have the utensils they needed? Did they have enough time to eat the food you packed? Did they struggle to open something? Do other children have something that is interesting to your child? A minor change may be an easy fix.



## Be a Lunch Packing Pro

Packing lunch gives kids the chance to try new foods mixed in with the comfort of familiar foods. It gives you space to pack a variety of nutrients into their meal. Packing culturally relevant foods can provide your child with a connection to home. It also allows them the opportunity to share their heritage with their peers. A note shares that you are thinking about them. You could write on a clean napkin or sticky note. Any brief message may give them something to look forward to in the lunch box. For children learning how to read, you could include a drawing or sticker.

You can celebrate special events with them from afar. Holidays, birthdays, and any other special day can provide inspiration for a themed lunch. A Valentine's Day lunch could include red foods or things shaped like hearts. A St. Patrick's Day lunch could include green foods. Food can be fun on these special days. But you could also add something extra. A festive napkin or piece of leftover Halloween candy may be a welcome surprise.

Packing lunch no longer needs to be stressful, boring, or feel like a chore. There are small ways to add excitement without too much money, time, or energy. A little planning, preparation, and added creativity will help you pack lunches that fuel children for the second part of their day.

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