



Breakfast might be the most important meal of the day, but lunch runs a close second. [Studies](#) have shown that children who eat a well-balanced lunch often do better in school and are more alert. It can be difficult enough to get your child to [eat right](#) when you're there to monitor what he or she eats. But in the cafeteria, where the temptations of pizza, vending machines and other unhealthy snacks await, you have to up your game to get kids to actually eat what you've packed.

To help you provide [healthy](#) lunches for your family, Spark People's sister site, BabyFit.com, has asked members and experts for tips and advice on packing kids' lunches.

First of all, remember that it's not *your* [lunch](#). If you pack broccoli and your son hates it, he won't eat it. Let your kids weigh in on what they want to pack in their lunches, and offer them a few [healthy choices](#) so they feel like they're in control.

Save Money and Pack Smart

- Though you might be tempted by their [convenience](#) and kid-friendly sizes, avoid pre-packaged, processed foods for your kids' lunches. They're expensive and loaded with sodium and preservatives.
- Think outside the lunchbox. Did your kids love last night's roasted chicken and vegetables? Pack some in a thermos to eat the next day. Pack leftover meatballs into a whole-grain hotdog bun for a lunchtime sandwich. Mix leftover rice and vegetables and top with chunks of pork or chicken.
- There's no rule that lunch has to include a sandwich, chips and a cookie. Try a tasting plate of chicken chunks or deli turkey roll-ups with a handful of grapes, and carrots with a small container of low-fat dressing. Finger foods are usually a hit with kids.

- Be safe. Pack lunches properly to ensure food safety and freshness. Invest in a reusable ice-pack, a thermos to hold warm foods and a variety of different sized containers. Include a cloth napkin and reusable utensils to cut down on waste. Remind your child to always wash her hands before she eats.

Whole grains

- Always choose whole-grain or whole-wheat bread. If your kids won't eat the crusts, that's OK--trim them off. It's more important that they're eating the sandwich.
- Toss air-popped popcorn with cinnamon and sugar for a sweet treat or sprinkle on some Parmesan cheese. It's a great whole-grain snack.
- Spread brown-rice cakes with peanut butter, all-fruit spread or light cream cheese.
- Whole-grain crackers that are low in fat and high in fiber are a good substitute for bread for little mouths. Kids love the crunch. Send a few pieces of cheese so kids can create their own mini sandwiches.
- Make whole-wheat versions of your family's favorite quick breads and muffins.
- Make large batches of cookies--oatmeal raisin is a good choice--and freeze them. You can take one from the freezer and put it in a lunch box. It will thaw by lunchtime.
- Instead of bread, try a whole-wheat tortilla for a sandwich. Roll one up with low-sodium deli meat, cheese and honey mustard.
- Whole-wheat pretzel sticks are crunchy and fun for kids. Make sure the version you buy lists "whole wheat flour" as a primary ingredient.

Fruit

- Use what fresh and in season. Seasonal fruit tastes better and is also cheaper.
- Make fruit easy for kids to eat. Segment oranges and core apples and pears (use lemon juice to keep them from turning brown). Cut up large pieces of fruit into smaller pieces.
- Offer dried fruit like raisins, cherries or cranberries.
- Buy 100% real fruit leathers or roll-ups.
- When buying canned fruit, make sure it's packed in 100% fruit juice rather than syrup.

- Instead of jams and jellies, make a peanut butter sandwich with banana slices, raisins or berries.
- Offer a handful of seedless grapes in a bag with a wet paper towel for sticky hands. (The wet paper towel also comes in handy after eating an orange.)
- Make a fruit smoothie and store it in a thermos. Add a handful of spinach for an extra serving of veggies. Your kids will never know. (Make the smoothie at night and freeze. It will be nice and slushy by lunchtime.)

Watch How to Make Dairy-Free Lemon Cake

Vegetables

- Cut raw veggies into bite size pieces and serve them with a dip. In addition to ranch, try peanut butter or another nut butter, pesto, salsa, hummus or guacamole--whatever you kids will eat.
- Add shredded vegetables to sandwiches and soup.
- Try mixing chopped broccoli or cauliflower with brown rice and a bit of cheese for a healthy casserole.

Dairy

- Either provide money for your child to buy milk or include a small carton of shelf-stable milk in every lunch.
- String cheese or a few cubes of cheese are a great way for kids to get calcium and protein.
- Freeze a small container of cottage cheese or yogurt. Add it to his lunchbox and it will be thawed by lunch.
- Instead of paying for flavored yogurt, add your kids' favorite all-fruit spread, chopped fruit or a drizzle of honey or maple syrup to the yogurt.
- Try topping cottage cheese with chopped tomatoes or pineapple chunks.
- If your child will only drink chocolate milk, allow it. It's better than drinking no milk at all.

Protein

- If your child isn't a fan of meat, that's OK. There are plenty of ways to get protein into his or her lunch. It's very important to include protein, because it will help keep your child fuller longer. As long as your child is old enough to eat nuts and there are no allergen concerns, experiment with various forms of nut butter. Beyond peanut, there's cashew, almond, sunflower, soynut and even hazelnut butter.

- Eggs are another great source of protein. Include a hard-boiled egg (peel it first) or a couple of deviled eggs (made with low-fat mayo).
- If your kids are fans of tuna, egg or chicken salad, sneak some veggies into it. Minced carrots, celery, zucchini and even cucumbers mix well. In addition to regular sandwiches, these salads make great dippers for whole-grain crackers and raw veggies.
- Hummus or black bean dip is full of filling fiber and protein. Like the salads mentioned above, it's great in sandwiches or as a dip.
- Disguise protein as a treat by mixing nuts with dried fruit and just a few chocolate chips for an easy trail mix.
 - **More Mom-Tested Tips**
- Here what BabyFit.com community team members are doing to make lunch fun, tasty and [healthy](#) for their kids.

LISAMARIE55 uses a thermos for both warm and cold food items. Pasta salad with diced tomatoes, cucumber, cheese and carrots, with an olive oil-based dressing, is a great lunch. In the winter, put veggie soup in the thermos. To sneak in extra vegetables, add shredded veggies (zucchini, carrots or celery) to tuna or chicken salad.

JAKE_ADAMSMOMMY likes to pack string cheese, grapes, carrot sticks, and cheese-and-cracker sandwiches that her kids can put together themselves.

COOKIECHRISTIAN likes to keep lunchtime fun with the following ideas: bagel sandwiches, celery sticks filled with peanut butter or cream cheese, carrot sticks, cucumber, "trees" (cauliflower and broccoli) with ranch dressing, frozen tubes of yogurt (they thaw by lunch), dried fruits, black olives, fruit kabobs with [pineapple](#), melon, and berries, chips and cheese or [bean dip](#), guacamole and pico de gallo for kids to assemble themselves.

LUV4MY3BOYS likes to include as many food groups as possible in her sons' lunches. She fills celery with peanut butter and raisins and uses a cookie cutter to make heart-shaped peanut butter sandwiches. She chooses whole grain bread, natural peanut butter, and all-fruit preserves. For

something sweet, she includes yogurt and granola with [fresh fruit](#), apples dipped in peanut butter, homemade [oatmeal raisin cookies](#), and trail mix.

KIMMER322 loves cutting up [fresh fruits](#) such as pears, bananas, apples and grapes and tossing them with vanilla yogurt.

TAMMYBEE5 likes to pack sliced carrots and cucumbers and fruit salad.