

Think Outside the (Lunch) Box

Packing School Lunches



It's a fantasy we all have at this time of year—sending our little ones off to school with the perfect lunch tucked away in their bags. It will be homemade, but with little effort. Kid-approved, while meeting Canada's Food Guide recommendations. Tough enough to last in a hot cloakroom all morning, but sensitive to the surrounding students' food allergies. Sanitary, but low on disposable packaging.

Meeting all those requirements five days a week? No wonder it's often only a fantasy.

But don't fret just yet. We've assembled our crack team of moms who have been down this road before and have some great lunch solutions that will turn that fantasy into reality and help you create a nutritious, nut-free, low-salt, homemade, and lower-cost lunch that the kids will like too—because after all, the healthiest lunch isn't that healthy if they don't eat it.

Beyond the Sandwich

For first-time-away-from-home-for-lunch kids, a whole sandwich can be daunting size-wise, while bigger kids often get distracted from eating by all the other fun lunchtime activities. The answer: ready-to-eat finger food with enough variety to keep them coming back for more. Mix and match the SavvyKid-tested items from each food category below and you've got lunch in the bag:

- Fruit – prepare in cubes, wedges, balls or segments (removing pits, stems and skins as needed). Choose from fresh fruit (such as grapes or apples—sprinkled with lemon juice to prevent browning—cantaloupe, oranges, berries, bananas), dried fruit (fruit bars, cranberries, apples, raisins, apricots) or apple sauce (in tubes or single-serve cups).
- Vegetables – cut into slices or spears, sent along with a small container of salad dressing or hummus if you have a little dipper in the house. Mini carrots, cucumber, sugar-snap peas, cherry tomatoes, olives, and edamame are popular choices.
- Dairy – try yogurt (tubes, tubs or drinks), cheese strings, Babybel cheese portions or cubes of cheddar, havarti or marble cheese, all perennial kid faves.
- Grains – go for whole grains whenever possible. Use pitas, buns, bagels and wraps to mix things up, or cut bread slices into fingers or fun shapes with cookie cutters. Crackers (pack them away from the cheese for optimum crunch), air-popped popcorn, mini-muffins and rice cakes are good choices, too. Leftover rice and pasta (heated and stored in a wide-mouth thermal container) make a warm treat on a cold day.
- The 'meat' – if traditional luncheon meat isn't a hit, try pepperoni sticks (we like [Piller's Turkey Bites](#)), bean dips, cottage cheese, hard-boiled eggs, leftover pizza or quesadillas (cut into small wedges), stew, chili or soup. Wrap thin slices of lean deli roast beef around short bread sticks, or turkey slices around a piece of string cheese. Cubes of lean ham or turkey breast or turkey dogs cut into pieces are also good for kids—send along a little packet of mustard or ketchup you picked up at a restaurant and they'll think they're in one too. Cream cheese sandwiches can be a good stand-in for those that usually only eat peanut butter—add cucumber or blueberries for a change.
- The drink – keep beverages low in sugar and high in nutrients with a serving of water or milk. If juice is a must, try calcium-fortified orange juice. We're sending our kids' drinks to school in the new [Klean Kanteen](#), a reusable stainless steel bottle that is toxin-free, non-leaching, and dishwasher-safe—the 12 or 18-oz. sizes are great for kids.

- The 'dessert' – nutritionists advise that occasionally adding a small portion of something sweet can actually help teach your child how to balance healthier choices with less healthy ones. Suggestions are a few animal crackers, oatmeal cookies, a serving of Jello or homemade low-fat pudding, a granola bar or even a piece of chocolate.

Housekeeping Matters

- Involve the kids in food selection, shopping and preparing, as they'll be more likely to eat their own creation. (If you have older kids, try keeping a container in the fridge full of sandwich fixings—sliced tomatoes, pickles, lettuce, cheese, meat—and get the kids to make up their own sandwiches.)
- Keep hot food hot with a thermal jar, cold food cool with small ice packs, and kids clean with a cloth napkin (we're all about litterless lunches) and a mini bottle of hand sanitizer for before eating.
- Stock up on a variety of reusable containers in different shapes and sizes (make sure that the lids can be easily removed and replaced by your kids), a good quality wide-mouth thermal container and an easy-to-clean (you really should wipe it out every night) lunchbox, label them all and you're ready to start packing.

With a few of these ideas, those dreaded 'boomerang lunches' will be a thing of the past. Now, if we could just get them to eat their dinner....