



Healthy School Lunch Ideas

Nutrition is particularly important for young children. The meals they eat are a vital part of their growth and development. If your families have older children who take a lunch to school or have meals served in their program, as providers you should ask them these questions:

- Are the lunches meeting the nutritional needs of the children?
- Are the children eating the lunches packed for them?
- Are the meals that the older children are receiving at school nutritious and do they offer a variety of choices?

If these are some of the questions that your families have been concerned about, share these sample lunch ideas to enhance children's lunches and meet their nutritional needs.

- Pack carrot and zucchini sticks, broccoli "trees," celery "boats" and pepper rings or sticks that are soft cooked (to prevent choking in children under 4 years of age).
- Pack sprouts, tomato slices and lettuce mixed with red cabbage, spinach and jicama slices to add variety to your child's lunches.
- Supply good sources of fiber and vitamins A and C such as apples (unpeeled), oranges, kiwi and pineapple slices, berries, bananas and unsweetened 100 percent juices (**not a fruit drink**).
- Try other calcium sources like hummous, beans, corn tortillas, low fat milk cheese, and yogurt, tofu, or cottage cheese with fruit. Be sure to pack

tightly; use freezer packs to keep the food cold and to prevent spoilage.

- For variety, try replacing whole wheat bread with whole wheat bagels, corn or flour tortillas, or pita bread for making sandwiches.
- Other bread products that add spice to lunches are dry unsweetened cereals, flavored rice or corn cakes, muffins and bread sticks.
- Cooked starches like casseroles made from rice, pasta, couscous or bulghur are great mixed with a variety of vegetables and meats like turkey, chicken, cheese, tuna, lean roast beef or beans. Keep in mind that these foods need to be stored in an air-tight container to keep their freshness. Make sure there is a microwave close by unless your child likes cold casseroles.
- Good, easy-to-pack protein ideas are string cheese and creamy peanut butter and jelly.
- New and exciting protein ideas are veggie burgers, salmon burgers, tempeh (tofu) fingers, beans or bean soup, and ground turkey. Again, be sure to store properly to prevent spoilage.

Resources

Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, *Healthy School Food* at <https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/healthy-communities/healthy-school-food>.

School Lunches. *Kids Health*. <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/lunch.html>.

Adapted from: *Healthy Young Children*, National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1991, and *Meals without Squeals: Child Care Feeding Guide and Cookbook* by Christine Berman, MPH, RD and Jacki Fromer.