

lunches that pack a healthy punch

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Packing healthy lunches for kids can be challenging when you're dealing with picky eaters and time constraints, but they don't have to be. With some general guidelines, the options become endless.

To make your life easier, design your child's lunch to be healthy and nutritious, fast to put together and free of wasteful packaging.

Most "little ones" will respond well to healthy food when good habits are built early. Starting from age 1, include two servings of a fruit or vegetable, a complex carbohydrate and a protein, with some good fats mixed in.

Pick some things you know your kids love and some things that are new, but not too scary. Be mindful of food texture.

The other thing to consider is time — time on both ends — how much preparation is needed? How long will it take your child to unpackage and eat the food? Children don't get much time

to eat, so you don't want them spending time with complicated wrapping. For example, string cheese can be really hard for little hands, and often the teacher is too busy to help, so before you know it, lunchtime is over. Consider breaking the seal or taking it out of the package entirely before packing it into your child's lunch.

BASIC NUTRITION COMPONENTS

When building your child's lunch, strive to hit the "big four": fat, fiber, carbs and protein.

the fats

Fats are important for growing bodies and several good foods overlap the "big four" categories, like cheese, nuts and eggs. These super lunch foods are an easy one-punch to get energy in those growing bodies.

the fiber

Fiber is great for preventing constipation, a fairly common issue in children who eat too many refined

foods. This is where the fruit and vegetables come in.

Provide finger foods that are easy to eat and require little to no cutting — this will cut down on your preparation time.

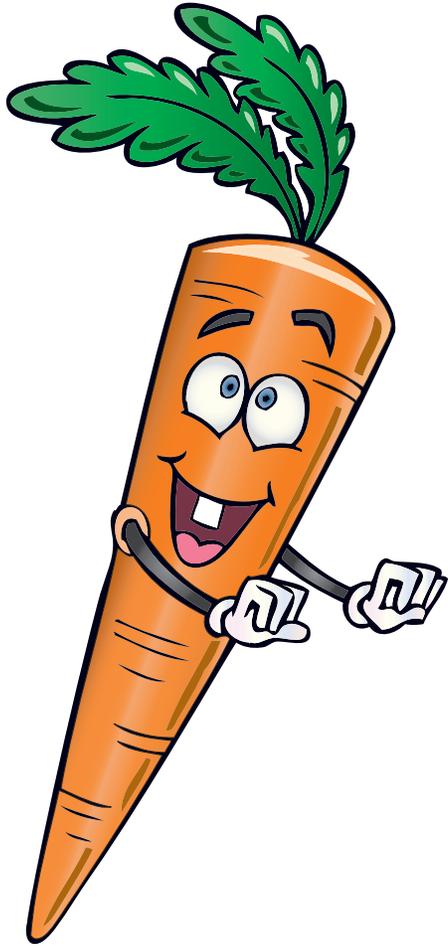
Baby carrots, mini cucumbers, grapes, apple chips and other dried fruits, berries, apple sauce, mini plums, cherries, mini tomatoes, snap peas, kale chips and mini sweet peppers are all delicious foods that are fast-packing, require no cutting and (the good news for parents) no prepping.

Beware choking hazards for children under 3.

Any food that fits through a toilet paper tube is dangerous and should be cut into smaller pieces. For example, cherry tomatoes and grapes must be cut in half. Make sure your child knows about pits, peels and other special eating processes before sending them in a to-go lunch.

Provide a variety of colors to maximize interest and nutritional value.

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Including a side dip is a great option for adding healthy fats and helping children ease into fruits or veggies they are less comfortable with. For example, try hummus, plain Greek yogurt or ranch dressing for veggies. Plain, vanilla or fruit yogurt works well for fruits, but watch for added sugar content. Cottage cheese, cream cheese and peanut butter go well with both fruits and vegetables.

Recent research by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease indicates that early introduction to peanuts is important for preventing a peanut allergy. Consult your pediatrician before changing your child's current diet plans.

the carbs

There are many good options for quickly adding important carbohydrates to children's lunches, including breads, crackers, pretzels, mini rice cakes and plain popcorn. Whenever possible, use "whole" options to further improve your child's fiber intake.

the protein

To add protein quickly to lunches, try cheese chunks, meat sandwiches or slices, edamame, nut butter sandwiches, hard boiled egg (peeled), beans, hummus or nuts.

If you want to get creative, use cookie cutters to add interest to otherwise plain lunch components.

the beverage

Thinking in advance about lunch beverages is important, because you can use a lunch beverage to do a little extra if you have a picky eater who continues to be underweight. Protein shakes come in juice box packaging and are flavored for children. A child's protein drink is a helpful boost, and it's easy to put milk into a reusable container if you have the right lunch box set.

But most often, water is the best option to accompany lunch. Popular juice packets lack healthy calories that tend to fill children's tummies, cutting down on their appetite. This can leave them hungry a short time later if they're too full to eat their lunch.

MAKE IT MOBILE

Bento boxes are great vessels for making lunch a mobile experience. These are becoming increasingly popular, with many varieties and child-themed designs available. Consider a box that is one piece, rather than several little containers in a bag, as it is more likely that all pieces will make it home.

Bento-style containers keep food items separate, which is helpful when young children have issues with mixing different foods.

Compartment containers improve the speed of packing. There's no searching for Tupperware or zip lock bags, and they come leak-proof. They also decrease packaging waste — all meals should minimize environmental impact.

The options are almost endless. Quick school lunches can be a fun way to introduce variety and nutrition to our children's diet, made with love, care and well informed selections.

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