HANDOUT D

Publication 8110

the Lunch box

APPEALING LUNCHES FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Children look forward to school lunches that have been planned especially for them. Appeal to your child's taste buds and appetite by keeping foods simple, adding contrast and variety, and preparing small serving sizes.

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Keep Foods Simple

Simple and easy-to-eat foods interest young children. Packaging that children can open and food they can eat easily help them develop self confidence and independence when eating their meals.

Add Contrast and Variety

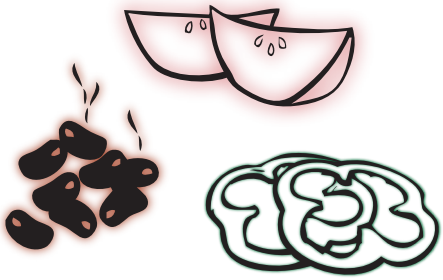
Using lots of colors, flavors, textures, and shapes makes lunches more tempting.

Color: Include foods with at least two colors from the rainbow along with neutral colors from grains, meats, and dairy products.

Texture: Include soft foods (breads, lunch meats, rice, pasta) and something crunchy or crisp (fresh fruits and vegetables, chopped nuts, crackers).

Flavors: Think of different foods your child might like. Mild-tasting foods are usually preferred by young children. Each week select a variety of flavors for sandwich fillings, breads, fruits, vegetables, and cheeses.

Shapes: Perk up a lunch box by cutting sandwiches and other foods into strips, circles, or triangles. Consider adding foods that naturally come in interesting shapes like broccoli "trees," cauliflower "clouds," and sliced bell pepper "rings."



Small Serving Sizes

When it comes to serving sizes, think small. Small children have small stomachs that can hold only small amounts of food. The amount of food needed daily will depend on many factors including how active your child is and how rapidly he/she is growing.

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MyPyramid for Preschoolers recommends the following small serving sizes for 2- to 3-year-olds and 4- to 5- year-olds. Since 2- to 3-year-olds have small stomachs, serve smaller serving sizes more often during the day.

Recommended Serving Sizes

	2- to 3-year-olds	**4- to 5-year-olds**
Grains	**3–5 oz total** *(choose 6–10 of the following)* ½ slice bread ½ small tortilla ½ cup dry cereal ¼ cup cooked cereal, pasta, rice ½ small muffin 3 small crackers 2 graham cracker squares ¼ English muffin ½ mini bagel 	**4–5 oz total** *(choose 4–5 of the following)* 1 slice bread 1 small tortilla 1 cup dry cereal ½ cup cooked cereal, pasta, rice 1 small muffin 6 small crackers 4 graham cracker squares ½ English muffin 1 mini bagel or ¼ regular
Vegetables	**1–1½ cups** *(choose 4–6 of the following)* ¼ cup chopped raw vegetables ¼ cup cooked vegetables ½ cup raw leafy greens	**1½–2 cups** *(choose at least 3–4 of the following)* ½ cup chopped raw vegetables ½ cup cooked vegetables 1 cup raw leafy greens
Fruits	**1–1½ cups** *(choose 2–3 of the following)* ½ small whole fruit ½ cup canned or frozen fruit 2 tablespoons dried fruit 	**1–1½ cups** *(choose 2–3 of the following)* 1 small whole fruit ½ cup canned or frozen fruit ¼ cup dried fruit
Milk	**2 cups** *(choose at least 4 of the following)* ½ cup milk ¾ ounce cheese ½ cup yogurt	**2 cups** *(choose at least 3 of the following)* ¾ cup milk 1 ounce cheese ¾ cup yogurt
Meat and Beans	**2–4 ounces** *(choose 2–4 of the following)* 1 ounce meat, poultry, or fish (2 tablespoons) 1 egg ¼ cup cooked dry beans 1 tablespoon peanut butter ¼ cup tofu ½ ounce chopped nuts or seeds 	**3–5 ounces** *(choose 3–5 of the following)* 1 ounce meat, poultry, or fish (2 tablespoons) 1 egg ¼ cup cooked dry beans 1 tablespoon peanut butter ¼ cup tofu ½ ounce chopped nuts or seeds

Hint: You may find that a whole serving of one food is too much for a meal. When that happens, use another meal or snack to offer the rest of the full serving. For example, serve ¼ of a tuna sandwich for lunch, then serve graham crackers with peanut butter for snack. Together, these make a whole serving from the meat and beans group.

Will My Child Be Hungry If I Send Small Serving Sizes for Lunch?

Probably not. Start the day by serving a healthy breakfast at home. Morning and afternoon snacks are offered at most preschools. With a healthy breakfast and snacks, a lunch with child-sized servings should keep your child satisfied throughout the day.

New Foods

Before putting a new food in your child's lunch, try it at home first. If your child likes the new food, include it in the lunchbox.

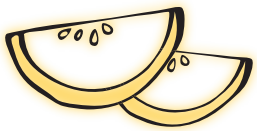
Too Much Food

Sending too much food in your child's lunch will probably result in food waste and may encourage your child to overeat.

Lunch Ideas

Simple lunches can combine a variety of textures, colors, shapes, and flavors. Here are two examples:

- *6 low-fat crackers with low-fat cheese*
  Broccoli trees
  Orange wedges
  Water
- *½ roast beef sandwich*
  Bell pepper rings
  6 animal crackers
  Low-fat milk



Be safe—pack lunches in insulated containers with a frozen ice pack.

DID YOU KNOW?

- *Toddlers and preschoolers grow more slowly than infants and usually are not as hungry as infants.*
- *Children's appetites vary from day to day depending on their activity and growth.*
- *Don't worry if your child occasionally doesn't eat a meal. It is most important that children eat a balanced diet over a 3- to 4-day period.*

Ideas from Parents

"Half of a sandwich seems to be plenty for my 4-year-old."
—Father

"I serve small portions, easy to eat, colorful, always changing."
—Mother

"Dipping sliced apples in orange or pineapple juice before packing prevents the apples from turning brown."
—Mother

"Make sandwiches in fun shapes using a cookie cutter."
—Mother

"Have children help pack their own lunches."
—Grandmother

"I ask my daughter what her favorite sandwiches, fruits, and vegetables are. That way I know she'll enjoy her lunch."
—Father

Something Special

Children enjoy an occasional surprise in their lunches. Consider adding a non-food item that says "You are special!"

Here are a few ideas for that special something:

- *picture of the family or a pet*
- *note from home*
- *colorful or holiday napkin*
- *sticker*

You can also choose a weekly educational theme and work it into lunch during the week. Theme ideas could include

- *a word*
- *a color*
- *a shape*
- *a scent*
- *a number*
- *a letter*

More Information

For more information on packing nutritious lunches for your child, log on to **http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/.**

The Lunch Box is a series of handouts designed for parents who pack lunches for their preschool children. The goal of these handouts is to assist parents in packing lunches that are nutritious, safe, and appealing for preschool children.

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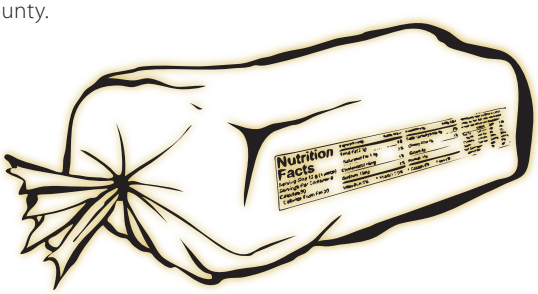

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Let's Get Moving! (Kit), Publication 3494

If My Child Is Overweight, What Should I Do About It?, Publication 21455

Fit Families Novela Series, Publication 3496

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