

We can all have brain freeze when it comes down to what to pack in our children's lunchboxes. Given that the average school year is around 39 weeks that's 195 lunches to think about and pack - ouch. So, here is some advice to help you on your way.

The Ideal Lunchbox

Healthy lunch boxes are all about balance. However, knowing what this is and putting it into practice daily is not always easy. Research¹ shows that only about 1 in 100 lunch boxes in England are actually in sync with our children's nutritional needs. When it comes down to what goes into lunch boxes sandwiches come out tops with 85 per cent of lunch boxes being built around these.¹ Alongside this about half contain some fruit, just 1 in 5 house vegetables¹ In contrast a whopping 82 per cent contain foods such as sweets or cakes.

So, how can we shift the balance? The majority of us are in a rush in mornings so carving out rabbit faces and whiskers is often not an option. BUT colour, texture and a few of your child's favourite stickers can all go a long way. Here is the low down on what to pack into a lunch box (Table 1).^{2,3}



Table 1: Lunchbox lowdown - What to pack?

Carbohydrate	Add in some slow release energy for your child. So wholemeal bread, wraps, crackers, rice, whole wheat pasta, cous cous, noodles or potatoes can be great.
Protein	Lean beef, turkey, ham, an egg, flakes of tuna/salmon, beans or lentils, peanut butter or hummus.
Dairy	Cheddar or red Leicester shapes (you can use a cutter on cheese slices), cottage cheese, fromage frais, natural yogurt.
Vegetables	Baby sweetcorn, cucumbers and tomatoes, mini peppers and shredded carrots can all add to the mix
Fruit	Easy peel oranges, bananas, raspberries, blueberries, small apples, kiwi berries are all winners.
Drinks	Water, skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, sugar-free or no-added sugar drinks are some good choices.
Discretionary	Sweet foods should be kept to a minimum but plain popcorn, rice cakes, tea cakes, fruit-bread, natural yogurt and sugar-free jelly can be good to include.
Added extras	Stickers on fruits, smiley faces drawn on bananas, sandwiches cut into shapes using cutters and a fun napkin can also add a bit of life to packed lunches

Beyond the Sandwich

As we have discussed a mammoth 85 per cent of lunchboxes contain the usual sandwich.¹ No wonder our children are probably sighing when they open them up. However lunchboxes needn't always be samey. We can be creatures of habit when it comes to doing our weekly or online shopping but let's mix it up for our children.

Here are a few ideas to get started with (see Table 2).

Sandwich	Wholemeal crackers, rice cakes, wraps, pittas, toasties.
Vegetable fingers	Vegetable spread (puree and spread onto the above), vegetable kebabs, pasta/rice salad with small vegetable cubes, mini cucumbers and peppers
Chocolate/cake	Tea cakes, malt loaf, fruit bread, dried mango, strawberries, cherries or pineapple.
Crisps	Plain popcorn, vegetable puffs, rice cakes, mini crackers, nuts, seeds, dried apple rings.
Other ideas	Slice of quiche, children's ploughman's, soups and stews (will need to go in a mini flask), potato salads and don't forget to use up last night's dinner! Highly cost effective too.

Little Foodie Facts

- A whopping 85 per cent of packed lunches contain the usual sandwich.¹
- Vegetables tend to be under packed compared with fruits.¹
- At the moment children are getting more nutrients from school meals than packed lunches⁴
- Children with packed lunches get more sugar, salt and less veg than those eating school meals⁵



Conclusions

It's time to add some extra spice and love to our children's lunchboxes. These needn't be expensive or finely crafted food sculptures but colour, texture and something more exciting than the usual sandwich can go a really long way. Adding in some leftover pasta or quiche from the night before is also super quick in a morning. It also saves thinking about what sandwich you need to make!



TOP TIPS FOR LUSCIOUS LUNCH BOXES

1. Offer your child (children) choice – change what you offer day to day, but also involve your child by giving them options that they can choose from. This allows them to feel like the food offered was their choice, rather than simply what they were given.
2. Get them involved in preparing the lunch box – children often enjoy lunch more when they know they contributed to its making.
3. Add in some little extras – including a note, funny picture, mini toys, some ribbon or a joke. This can make the lunch box a little more special and can be a good way to get your children excited about lunch time.
4. Include practical tools – plastic knives, forks, spoons and napkins along with ice packs to ensure your child's lunchbox stays fresh and practical.
5. Try not to overfill lunch boxes - children can have small appetites. It's better to offer smaller amounts of ready to eat foods and encourage them to eat as much as they can.
6. Don't forget a drink. Ask if your school provides water. If not pack a bottle or beaker of water for them.
7. Communicate with teachers - they may be able to provide feedback on how well your child is eating at lunchtime.



Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

Written by Dr Emma Derbyshire PhD, RNutr and Charlotte Stirling-Reed RNutr.

Further Information: www.littlefoodie.org

Copyright © Little Foodie.org

References

1. Evans CE et al. (2010) A cross-sectional survey of children's packed lunches in the UK: food- and nutrient-based results. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 64(11):977-83.
2. NHS Choices (2017) Healthier Lunchboxes. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/childhealth6-15/Pages/Lighterlunchboxes.aspx>
3. Children's School Food Trust (2017) What to pack in a lunchbox. Available at: <http://www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/childrens-food-trust/parents/your-childrens-food-at-school/packed-lunches/what-to-put-in-a-lunchbox/>
4. Pearce J et al. (2013) Lunchtime food and nutrient intakes of secondary-school pupils; a comparison of school lunches and packed lunches following the introduction of mandatory food-based standards for school lunch. *Public Health Nutr* 16(6):1126-31.
5. Evans CE et al. (2016) Impact of school lunch type on nutritional quality of English children's diets. *Public Health Nutr* 19(1):36-45.

