



Secrets to school lunch success

September 01, 2010

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With summer's last days, parents breathe a collective sigh of relief for the return to routine that school brings. With it comes an end to the patchwork of childcare and frantic day camp pick-ups that characterize summer for the majority of moms and dads.

But there's one school-week routine that hardly anyone anticipates with relish: the monotonous task of packing lunch boxes – day in, day out, from September to June.

So how do you get on top of that task while providing healthy lunches your kids will actually eat?

Food-savvy parents say that planning ahead, a little inspiration and a realistic view about how much kids can eat in a limited time frame are key to minimizing frustration and keeping everyone from getting sandwich bored.

Lianne Phillipson-Webb, a registered nutritionist who [teaches parents how to cook healthy meals](#), and the author of [Sprout Right: Nutrition from Toddler To Tummy](#), sees many parents who dread the task of filling lunch boxes each day.

"I think that dreading comes from a lack of creativity, or maybe not knowing what is healthy and how to change things up and feel good about what you're putting in their lunch," says the mom of two girls, 7 and 5. "And when you come up with something different and get a full lunch box back at the end of the day, you're more likely to think, 'well, I tried,' and go back to the bologna sandwich.' "

Phillipson-Webb usually packs leftovers for lunch. "It could be a bit of chicken with potatoes or rice. They've



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Triangles of pita bread with hummus and veggies, plus a nutritious, nut-free cookie makes for a good school lunch with nary a soggy sandwich in sight.

got used to having leftovers in their lunch. Or if I'm really stuck, they'll get a muffin and some cheese to balance the carbs with protein."

"I either buy [Organic Oven](#)'s carrot muffins, otherwise I make them myself. Muffins are tricky because they are often cupcakes masquerading as muffins." (For one of Phillipson-Webb's favourite healthy muffin recipes, go to the back-to-school section on [parentcentral.ca](#).)

Even for an expert accustomed to whipping up things like kale-oregano pesto to add greens to grilled cheese sandwiches, it took the better part of a year to find a lunch-making hit with her eldest daughter.

When some lunches were coming back almost untouched, she decided to involve daughter, Logan, in the process. "I said, 'We're going to do this together. I'm going to give you a choice of two things and you'll know what's in your lunch box because you've been a part of it.'"

Emma Waverman, co-author of *Whining and Dining*, blogger at [Embracethechaos.ca](#) and a mom of three, ages 10, 7 and 4, agrees that involving the kids is key.

"When kids pack their own lunch they eat more of it," she says. .

When her son started school, she had to adjust her expectations about how much food can realistically get eaten during a 20-minute lunch break.

"There isn't enough time usually for most kids to eat what we pack them, and I had to let go of my anxiety when he came home and three-quarters of his lunch was still there," says Waverman.

Now she focuses on two kid-appealing but nutritionally dense items that will fuel her children through the afternoon – whole-wheat pita triangles with hummus and veggies plus an oatmeal raisin cookie, for example – and hopes to achieve more variety by day's end.

Another thing to keep in mind: "A lot of kids don't really like sandwiches and probably haven't eaten a lot of sandwiches until we ship them off to Grade 1."

Banana bread and some nut-free pea butter is a good alternate, says Waverman, as is a mini-pizza made on an English muffin.

"If your kid will eat leftovers, then you've won the jackpot, because you can get a Thermos and send those," she says.

That's what Michael Forbes has found making lunch for his two children, 7 and 5. "A wide-mouth Thermos is the best way to get around sandwich-centric lunches," he says. "We make pasta, chili, soups, curries and biryani."

Bulk-buying is helpful for Vicky Weiss, whose two children are 14 and 10.

"I stock up on the things that they like – buy five boxes of granola bars at a time, make double batches of muffins," she says. "And I make lunch the night before because otherwise I start panicking."

To really cut down on work, copy the ingenious school-lunch cheat arrived upon by Sheila Keenan and four other parents at her son's school.

"Five moms got together to form a lunch club. Each of us was assigned one day to make lunch for all our kids," explains Keenan. "The rationale being, it's easier to come up with one creative lunch idea per week, rather than trying to come up with a new lunch idea day after mind-numbing day."

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