

Daily Union Article
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Title: Pack a Healthy Lunch

Our time for preparing for the school year is quickly coming to an end. But there is one last minute task you might want to consider: Pack a Lunch or School Lunch?

There is no doubt that participation in the school meal plans require less time and effort from the family. As a parent or guardian, you are assured that your student(s) are being offered a meal plan that is nutritionally sound and conscientious of fat, salt, and sugar intake. The cost per meal is kept to a minimum and a much better "deal" than anything you will buy at a fast-food restaurant. However, schools aren't allowed to randomly select foods they want to put on their menu.

The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) provides regulatory and fiscal oversight to school lunch programs in Kansas schools under guidelines mandated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA.) Schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) receive reimbursement from USDA for each meal served to eligible students. In return, these schools must serve lunch menus that meet USDA nutrition requirements.

For many families, school lunch is the best choice for their children. However, for other families, they choose to send their students to school with a packed lunch. This choice may be due to a finicky eater, food allergies (although the schools can accommodate these with advance notice), personal preferences, and other special dietary needs of the child.

My family has chosen both alternatives over the years. There's no doubt that I would rather stay in bed another 20-30 minutes in the morning rather than preparing my boys a fresh breakfast and packing 4-5 lunch bags. The reality for my boys is that having their own lunch packed gives them several more minutes to eat lunch since they don't have to wait in line and they can eat lunch "leftovers" after school to help carry them through to our 7 pm evening meal. It also gives them more choice in what they have for lunch that they know they like.

Unfortunately, children may not be getting the same nutritional balance in their lunch bag as they would if they ate the meal options provided by their school. It really does take more planning to pack a healthy balanced lunch. You need to think about what needs added to the grocery list, what will hold well inside the lunch box, and what needs included to make sure there is something in the bag from every food group.

You also need to think about more specific needs. For my boys, I pack two times the amount of protein they would get in their school lunch. They need this for their

growing bodies and to hold their appetite at bay through after school activities until evening meal time.

It's not always easy to keep their lunches tasty and healthy! Sometimes I struggle with making sure they get enough vegetables and fruit since we only pack cold foods in their lunch bag. I work hard to not overload their bags with too many carbohydrates – but we are a carb-craving culture and my kids really like refined carbs just like everyone else!

Packing tasty school lunches that provide my children with the nutrition needed to perform well in school is easier to do when I follow the following simple reminders:

- 1) I ask my kids' input when making my grocery store shopping list. They will be more likely to eat everything I pack if I have included them in the food selection process!
- 2) I have become more carb-conscious. Carbohydrate foods provide kids with the energy they need, but some carbs are healthier options than others. I try to include a variety of whole grain bread options in their lunches such as raisin bread, whole wheat tortillas, multi-grain bagels, English muffins, pita bread, or whole grain crackers. Popcorn is a favorite alternative to potato chips. The goal is to give them the energy they need without going overboard.
- 3) Protein is key but requires careful selection! Protein foods help build and maintain muscle as well as helping to take the edge off of hunger. Low-fat protein options are the best way to go. Low-fat yogurt, beans (a black bean dip for whole grain crackers is a favorite at my house!), or lean low-fat cold cut meats are good choices.
- 4) Fruits and veggies can be a struggle, but they are key to providing children with a wide variety of vitamins and minerals that keep them healthy. The small mandarin oranges are handy. They are easy to peel, and can be consumed quickly on their tight lunch break. Red grapes, cherry tomatoes, carrot and celery sticks, apples and bananas are other choices. My children often want a dip to go along with their fruit or vegetables. Low-fat ranch dressing or low-fat vanilla yogurt are my go-to options.
- 5) I limit sweets and snack cakes. That doesn't mean they should never go in the lunch bag, but it does mean I make sure only one of those options makes it to their bag each day. A cookie or a container of sweetened applesauce is commonly added to our lunch bags.
- 6) Water! I often pack a frozen water bottle in their insulated lunch bags rather than a freezer pack. This keeps their food cold and safe and also offers them something cold to drink as they go through their afternoon.

Planning ahead is key to packing a healthy and tasty lunch. If you find your morning just won't allow for it, know that their school lunch is always healthy and always there! Until next time, keep living resourcefully!