

School Lunches – The definitive guide

The one thing more annoying than making school lunches is to have said school lunch make its way home again uneaten.



Introduction / Reality Check

The best case scenario will be that the child makes their own lunch but in my experience (10th year X 6 school lunches) this seldom happens. When I started to put some thought into this whole lunch-making process I came up with the idea of doing a chart, like a menu plan for the week with the child's name followed by day of the week and their choice for lunch for each day. Then I sat back and really thought about it and said to myself **FORGET IT!**

Having had several variations of rewards charts, job charts and pocket money charts fall by the wayside I just know that this is not going to work. Great in theory but not in practice. For starters too much planning is required and secondly kids will think that it's great perhaps once but then the novelty will be gone and filling it out again will be a struggle and probably forgotten until Monday morning when it's too late. You may as well accept that neither child nor parent will be disciplined enough to keep on filling in and sticking to the lunch chart. So what can you do?

- 1) Find out what your child likes (ask them, make suggestions and ask what their friends have that they would like to try)
- 2) Keep varying the lunches
- 3) Use your freezer to stock up on standby items like bagels, wraps, pitas etc. and stock your store cupboard with long life sandwich items such as tuna, sweetcorn etc..
- 4) Try to home-bake once in a while and freeze cupcakes, scones etc in useable sized batches

5) Try to get the child to make their own lunch maybe once a week

All schools will have their own lunch policies and most primary schools do not allow junk food. Some I feel go a little too far in not allowing any sweet things to feature in the lunchbox. Personally I see no harm in including a home-baked plain cupcake or a fruity muffin though the dentist may disagree with me. I would however advocate that the drink should just be plain water though I don't agree with buying disposable plastic bottles of water and at home I have a filtered jug of tap water in the fridge that I use for filling reusable drink bottles.

The Contents:

What features in the lunchbox is entirely up to you and I have broken down suggested inclusions into tables below in the following areas:

- 1) The main event: A filled pitta, wrap, sandwich, roll, ciabatta, bagel etc. or pasta, rice etc. as below.
- 2) Fruit and / or vegetable: Whole, in pieces or as a salad
- 3) Filler: Extra dairy or carb portion

Make up your own main event by choosing a protein filling, at least one 'Plus 1' and then dressing it up from the table below. Alternatively select a tried and tested filling combo from the table below.

Depending on how long the school day is you may want to include an extra main or filler. (For recommendations on what is recommended for a healthy lunch see www.safefood.eu)

Wrapping Things Up

Using a number of really small reusable containers that will just fit a sandwich or the fruit works better than using one large lunch box where there is a strong likelihood that the crackers will end up mashed into the side of the apple and the contents of the sandwich will decorate the entire box. Small plastic sandwich bags can be handy and are reusable if you give them a wipe out or a more environmentally friendly option 'The Paper Lunch Bag' (by Walsh Packaging, Roscrea) made with greaseproof paper can be reused and recycled. As with all food the first impact will be visual so try to make the food look as attractive as possible.

The main event: A filled pitta, wrap, sandwich, roll, ciabatta, bagel etc. or pasta, rice etc. as below

(try to steer towards wholegrain varieties if possible)

Pitta	Wrap	Sandwich	Roll	Ciabatta Panini	Bagel	Pasta	Rice	Other Grain	Quiche or Savoury Pie	Other (3 rd table)
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Filling for the pitta/wrap/sandwich/roll/ciabatta/panini/bagel etc.

(Make up your own filling by choosing from the following or go with a tried and tested combo from the table below this one)

Protein	cooked ham, chicken, chicken tikka, cajun chicken, beef, corned beef, turkey, sausage, rashers of bacon, salami, chorizo, tuna, sliced cheese, grated cheese, (vary type of cheese e.g. cheddar, mozzarella, goats, feta etc), soft cheese, egg sliced or mashed, salmon, hummus
Plus 1	Lettuce, avocado, tomato, sundried tomatoes, onion, pickle, cucumber, beetroot, sweetcorn, watercress, bean sprouts, spring onion, sliced olives, ratatouille (roasted aubergine, courgette, red onion , tomato, peppers), coleslaw, potato salad
Dress it Up	butter, olive oil spread, mustard, mayonnaise, salad cream, relish, chutney, natural yoghurt, soured cream, fresh or dried herbs, chilli flakes, basil or coriander pesto, sundried tomato pesto, salsa, tapenade, hummus, guacamole, bread stuffing (breadcrumbs, butter, parsley, thyme, onion)
Lazy Day!	Peanut butter, jam, nutella

Tried & Tested combos for pitta/wrap/sandwich/roll/ciabatta/panini/bagel etc.

BLT: bacon, lettuce, tomato
Ploughmans: cheddar cheese & pickle
egg, salad cream, water cress & diced onion
tuna, sweetcorn & mayo
feta, rocket, chopped sundried tomato, red onion & ballymaloe relish
chicken, rocket, mustard mayo, sundried tomato & parmesan
smoked salmon, cream cheese & squeeze lemon
cream cheese, cucumber, sundried tomato, pesto
crispy bacon, tomato, cream cheese, guacamole
grilled chicken, sweet peppers, rocket parmesan & caeser dressing
chicken & stuffing

Pasta, Rice & other alternatives

(Instead of throwing away leftovers, re-use them for lunches the next day)

Pasta	Either plain with a drizzle of olive oil to prevent sticking together or with a light coating of a tomato puree sauce. Increase nutritional value by adding any protein or plus 1 from the list above. Pasta with peas, parsley, chives, zest & juice lemon, olive oil.
Rice	curried rice with raisins, rice with a mix of ratatouille (roasted aubergine, courgette, red onion , tomato, peppers) etc.
Grains e.g.	Made up with with juice of half a lemon or lime or vegetable or chicken stock Add in chopped and roasted veg e.g. courgettes, peppers, halved cherry tomatoes

Couscous / Quinoa / Bulghar Wheat /	Increase nutritional value by crumbling in some cheese e.g. feta or adding some spicy chopped chicken or chickpeas
Quiche	Classic quiche Lorraine of ham & cheese or filled with mushrooms, bacon, leeks, onions, peppers, sundried tomatoes, regular tomatoes etc.
Savoury Pie	With similar filing to quiche perhaps on a puff pastry base e.g. left over stilton tart or sundried tomato and goats cheese or caramelized onions and feta
Other	Sausage roll, samosas, cornish pastie, soup

Fruit

Whole	Apple, orange, mandarin, satsuma, banana, peach, pear, plum, grapes etc.
Half	Kiwi & provide teaspoon
Slice	Melon, Watermelon, Pineapple, any of the above
Berries	Strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, cherries
Chunks	Create a fruit salad with any of the above cut into chunks & provide a fork. To preserve cut fruits such as apple and banana from browning, squeeze over the juice of a lemon and an orange.
Puree	Stewed apple, pears, plums, berries, rhubarb & provide a spoon.
Smoothies	Combine fruit, natural yoghurt and orange juice (unsweetened)
Dried	Raisins, Sultanas, Dates

Vegetable / Pulse

Sticks	Carrot , Cucumber, Peppers, Celery & perhaps provide a dip
Mixed	Salad bowl containing any of: lettuce, avocado, tomato, sundried tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, onion, pickle, cucumber, beetroot, sweetcorn, watercress, bean sprouts, spring onion, sliced olives, ratatouille (roasted aubergine, courgette, red onion , tomato, peppers), coleslaw, potato salad, chickpea salad, three bean salad (kidney beans.....),
Pieces	Broccoli Floret
Dip	Raita (sp); natural yoghurt, mint & cucumber, soured cream, tomato ketchup & mayo mixed, sweet chilli dip, hummus, pesto, guacamole
Soup	Hot soup in a thermos flask

Filler

Yoghurt etc. & other	Plain (who eats plain?) with your own fruit pieces or puree added Fruit corners Petit filous Rice pudding Custard – plain or with fruit puree added e.g. stewed apple / rhubarb
Petit Filous	(difference)
Scone	Wholemeal, plain, fruit or cheesy. Add butter & jam, lemon curd, cheese spread, pesto,

	tapenade
Cheese	Sliced cheddar, triangle of soft cheese
Crackers / dried bread	Cream crackers plain or with butter, jam, soft cheese, cheese slice, pesto, tapenade Krisp bread Ryvita
Soft bread / cakes	Banana bread, brioche, mini pancakes, sundried tomato bread, cheese bread, olive bread, waffles. Add butter & jam, lemon curd, cheese spread, pesto, tapenade
Muffins / Cupcakes	Plain or fruit
Cake	Dried fruit cake, apple cake, rice cake
Crisps	Pitta crisps & dip, pack of croutons
Popcorn	Plain popcorn
Biscuits/Bars	Flapjacks, Lunchbox oatmeal cookies (as per picture above), Shortbread, Plain cookie
Other	Sesame sticks, bread sticks
Lazy Day!	shop bought cereal bar / energy bar (if they are not allowed, take off the wrapper and wrap it in parchment paper)

This is an evolving guide so please leave comments with suggestions and they will be included in the next update of 'School Lunches : The definitive guide'

Til next time, Sheila

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