



Build a Bento Box Lunch for Kids

Pack Five Foods for Fun, Flavor and Health

by Judith Fertig

Old-style rectangular metal lunchboxes are passé. New, convenient compartmentalized containers inspired by the Japanese bento box and Indian tiffin allow parents to pack up to five different, colorful and healthy items for a child's lunch with less plastic wrapping to separate foods. It dovetails exactly with what nutrition professionals recommend.

Think Five

"People usually eat with their eyes," says Allison Forajter, a clinical dietitian at Community Hospital, in Munster, Indiana. "The more color and variety presented the better."

Holley Grainger, a registered dietitian, creator of the blog *Cleverful Living* at *HolleyGrainger.com* and mother of two school-age daughters in Birmingham, Alabama, agrees, saying, "These boxes make lunchbox packing easier because each compartment can be assigned a different food group."

Grainger usually starts with a protein, adds fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and inserts a surprise treat for a total of five selections. "One easy and inexpensive way to boost protein is through low-fat dairy options like milk, yogurt, string cheese or cottage cheese. For children that like meat and poultry, roasted chicken and low-sodium deli turkey are delicious options. This is where I like to work in leftovers, so last night's entrée may be the filling for today's lunchbox mini-tacos. For a high-protein vegetarian/vegan option, beans/legumes are a favorite, whether in dips, salsas, salads or pastas," she says.

Forajter recommends exploring varied colors of the same type of fruits or vegetables. Offer green and purple grapes or red, yellow, green and orange bell pepper strips, and ask kids if each color tasted different. Including unusual fruits or vegetables can be a learning experience for the whole family. "Try purple and orange cauliflower or red, yellow, white or purple carrots," she suggests.

Grainger not only packs healthy foods for her kids, she makes sure they get a little "emotional nutrition", as well. She might include a piece of chocolate or a cookie, but the surprise doesn't have to be food. "A note or picture from you written on your child's napkin adds a special touch. It lets them know you're thinking about them and gives them a feeling of security throughout the day," she says.

Parents faced with the daily round of lunch packing may benefit from the system of five. Each item goes into a separate compartment in the bento, box-style lunchbox. Many also offer a space for a “chiller” to keep foods safely cool.

Easy Options

Protein: turkey breast, chicken breast, hardboiled egg cut in half, nuts, beans, almond butter, string cheese, yogurt

Fruit: blueberries, apple slices, plums, grapes—something easy for kids to eat

Vegetable: carrots, English cucumbers, celery sticks, bell pepper strips—easy finger foods; kids might eat more veggies if provided with a dip such as hummus or natural homemade ranch dressing

Whole grain: ancient or whole grain crackers, pita bread, non-GMO blue corn chips

Treat: a happy surprise could

be a piece of wrapped dark chocolate, a crayon or a funny, loving or encouraging note from a parent

Lunch: a Key Meal

“When children are fueled with nutritious foods, they are more alert and focused throughout the day, leading to better behavior, concentration and test scores,” says Grainger. “They also have the opportunity to fill up on many of the es-

sential vitamins and minerals often lacking in away-from-home meals. I’ve found that my children are hungrier at lunch than at other meals, so they tend to fill up on whatever is being offered.”

Judith Fertig writes award-winning cookbooks plus foodie fiction from Overland Park, KS (JudithFertig.com).



GOOD BOX LUNCH IDEAS

Holley Grainger, a mother of two in Birmingham, Alabama, took photos of the healthy lunches she packed—all 125 of them. Check them out at <https://tinyurl.com/ybnrl6ro>.

Kelly Kwok, cookbook author and mother of two schoolchildren in Buffalo, New York, shares many perfect-for-a-lunchbox recipes on her blog *LifeMade-Sweeter.com*. Here are three of them.

Egg ‘Salad’ Sandwich: Kwok makes a healthier egg salad sandwich for her children by blending scrambled eggs with Greek yogurt, Dijon mustard, and salt and pepper as a spread on multigrain bread.

Healthy Sides: Cooked corn on the cob, pumpkin seeds and dried cranberries, apple slices with or without almond butter

Hummus Wraps: Store-bought hummus, a bag of baby kale or spinach, a few shredded carrots and a whole-grain tortilla come together for an easy wrap.

Healthy Sides: Stemmed sweet cherries, banana chips, yogurt

Rainbow Skewers: On short wooden skewers, slide on tiny mozzarella balls, cherry tomatoes and cooked tortellini with a tiny container of pesto or marinara sauce for dipping.

Healthy Sides: Mixed fresh berries and bell pepper strips, healthy granola bar

Brownie Bite Dough

Yields: 1 pound dough

Brownie Dough

1½ cups raw, unsalted walnuts

¾ cup, cocoa powder

2 cups soft dates

(preferably Medjool)

Preheat the oven to 350° F.

Place the walnuts on a rimmed baking sheet and toast until lightly colored and fragrant, 7 to 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool.

In a food processor, pulse the walnuts until they are finely ground. Add the cocoa and salt. Pulse to combine.

Pit the dates and add them one at a time through the feed tube of the food processor while it’s running. The resulting mixture should resemble cake crumbs but, when pressed, will easily stick together (if not, add more dates).

Use the dough to make the Brownie Bites. Leftover dough (one-third of the batch) will keep in the freezer for up to one month.



Vanilla Coconut Brownie Bites

Yields: about 10 balls (servings)

½ batch (about ½ lb) of brownie dough

1 tsp pure vanilla extract

3 Tbsp unsweetened, desiccated coconut, toasted

Combine the dough with the vanilla and 1½ teaspoons of the coconut, using both hands to fully incorporate the ingredients.

Shape the dough into 10 small, bite-size balls, then roll them in the remaining coconut.

Freeze the balls until ready to eat. Store in the freezer for up to one month.

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