



Let's do lunch

by Monica Ho Ehlers

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When I was a little girl, my favorite lunch to take to school was a Liverwurst sandwich on squishy white bread. It was usually accompanied by an apple packed so lovingly by my mom. I would savor every little bite of that sandwich. Then I would casually chuck the fruit in the nearest garbage can. Thirty years later, I have two school-age daughters of my own and like many parents, have tried desperately to escape bad lunch karma.

To send kids to school with lunches they will eat, you need only ask one question: “What can you see yourself eating while you are at school?” which is different than “What do you want for lunch?”

I found this out the hard way. My kids eat sandwiches—at home, not at school. I didn't know this until another mom at school told me that her son loved my sandwiches. According to him, I made them “all soggy, where it tastes like she mixed all the peanut butter and jelly together. It doesn't even taste like there's bread on there.”

My daughter was hocking her lunch for a bag of chips and a fruit roll up on a weekly basis. If this sounds familiar to you, ask the question and be prepared for some interesting answers. It turns out my older daughter preferred to take leftovers, soup or spaghetti to school.

Don't panic if your child tells you that they can see themselves having their Halloween candy and a juice box for lunch. This was my younger daughter's answer. Instead, take the opportunity to talk openly about “choices” and “compromises”.

After that, I did something unconventional. I let her choose between bringing a juice box or the candy, in addition to bringing a fruit and pasta with vegetables for lunch. It's important to let kids feel some control over the process. Keep in mind that a school lunch is one meal you are not able to monitor. The most nutritious lunch means nothing if it is traded for something more tempting from a classmate or worse, thrown away.

The next step is to let your children pick their favorite fruit and vegetable at the grocery store. To make it more appetizing, pack a small container of dip like hummus, peanut butter or Ranch dressing with their lunch.

Have your children help prep lunches. Keep a variety of wholesome snacks from which they can choose to pack. Reserve a drawer in your refrigerator for washed and sliced fruit and veggies as well as cheese sticks or yogurt packs. Let them pick out a thermos and ice pack.

Lastly, keep the lines of communication open. If your child raves about a friend's lunch, ask what it was they liked. It may just be the container of a prepackaged store-bought lunch that they find appealing.

If however, it's the sugary drink and dry Top Ramen noodles, remain calm. Allow your child to opt for the drink OR the Ramen as a snack in their lunch for one day then talk about it.

You might say, "We don't normally eat Ramen for lunch because there aren't a lot of nutrients in it." Examine the facts on the back of the Ramen package with your child. "If you just ate the noodles for lunch, you might find that you won't have a lot of energy. What else would you like to add?" Offer at least two healthier selections.

My general rule is for every less-than-nutritious item in the lunch box, there is a healthy one right next to it. By giving your kids options in moderation, you can help them gain control and not get out of control when it comes to lunch and eating while away from home.

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