

# Taking lunch can save money and add healthy variety to diet

By Michaela Kennedy

Students sitting at the local lunch table have much to choose from these days, thanks to the Information Age. A little creativity and communication go a long way in getting children to enjoy nourishment at the midday meal break.

School lunch programs are undoubtedly improving in nutrition and variety. Many parents find convenience and comfort in knowing their children can eat a healthy meal served at school for \$2 or \$3. Nevertheless, families with two or three students in school, not to mention the working adults who need to eat, may feel differently. Parents are shocked to find a monthly lunch bill climbing over \$100, and creeping close to \$200 a month, in some cases.

Some students check the school lunch menu the night before to decide if something tasty will be served—or not. Others may be vegetarian and soon tire of the limited choices offered in the cafeteria. A meal consultation with the child in your home reaps insight. Some children, especially if they have a few years of school experience, will offer tips for their lunch pail.

Seventh grade student Kaela says she helps her mother make her lunch, or she packs it herself. She brings a lunch to school about three days a week, depending on

what is on the school lunch menu. “I do the pizza every Friday,” Kaela said.

Some ideas from the middle school student include a bagel with cream cheese, along with some raw veggies and a ranch dressing dip. “Celery with peanut butter is good,” Kaela said. A juice box or pre-packaged yogurt completes the lunch box. A refillable water bottle is essential for the classroom.

Another student at the Lawn Avenue School, Roma, enjoys the rice or veggie burgers her mother makes for her. She does not miss pizza day because she prefers the homemade pizza in her lunch box. “My mom cuts it in funny shapes for me,” Roma said, which adds to the fun of eating a lunch from home.

Organization takes the fret out of the daily lunch prep time. A white board with lists of choices for drinks, snacks and main food items give the kids a healthy variety and allows them to choose what they want. One step further is to line up boxes on the kitchen counter, each containing fruit, vegetables, and whole grains. The children can pick an item for their meal from each box. As a result, parents may find out their child no longer trades food in the cafeteria.

For the budget-minded parent, money-saving ideas for lunch bags can save big bucks in the long run.

Pre-packaged foods, such as cracker, cheese and deli meat sets, not to mention pudding or fruit cups, add up in costs and are typically tiny portions. Buy plastic containers or save yogurt cups with lids that can be rinsed and reused. Reusing containers is yet another step to help keep the environment clean. Roma says she does not miss the prepackaged juice boxes, as she carries a refillable container for her drinks.

Those who like the condiments and dipping sauces at fast food restaurants may think twice about throwing the extras away. The packaged sauces are already paid for, and they fit perfectly in a lunch bag. Topping ideas for yogurt or pudding include chewy raisins or other dried fruits, nuts, coconut, and granola.

Perishable foods are certainly a concern with the expanded variety of lunch offerings. A cold pack keeps foods fresh and tasty, without worrying about bacteria. For hot foods like soup or chili, pack them in insulated bottles. Washing the bottles and rinsing them with boiling water keeps them safe for reuse.

For more tips on healthy and varied choices for meals going to school, browse the online resources available at the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Web site, [www.usda.org](http://www.usda.org).



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The JTSCA plans to offer a \$500 scholarship to any island resident who plans to pursue a career in healthcare or a healthcare-related field.

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For more information or to make reservations, call Charlotte Richardson at 423-1026.

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