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INFO SHEET: BUILDING SCHOOL LUNCHES

School Lunch

Building school lunches is an important task when getting our kids off to school. As busy, working parents, we came up with a variety of simple ideas that were quick and easy to put together. Eventually the kids took over and have since reminded me of the 'formula' I used when teaching them to build their own lunches. Lunches were typically comprised of 4 components with some fun ideas for every style eater. While you don't have to always include the 4th component, our kids loved it!

- 1. Fruits/Veggies:** Start by incorporating a fresh piece of fruit and/or a small bag of sliced veggies. Here's a few of our tried and true selections: carrot sticks, celery sticks, cucumbers, steamed edamame pods, pickles, sliced sweet red peppers, apples, bananas, grapes, cherries, kiwi, and oranges. Those were staples in our home but certainly any fresh fruit/veggie is the focus here.
- 2. Dips and dressings:** Include a dip/dressing they could either add to their sandwich/wrap or use to dip their veggies into. Having a dip means they are far more likely to eat the vegetables! Our favorite dips and dressings included hummus (many varieties and flavors), black bean dip, guacamole, white bean dip, salsa, sweet mustard dressing, creamy ranch style dressing, and tofu-cashew mayo. You can find recipes for these suggestions and more in the [PlantPure Nation](#) and the [PlantPure Kitchen](#) Cookbooks.
- 3. Sandwiches/Wraps/Leftovers:** This is the main component of the lunch boxes. A couple of slices of whole grain bread or a whole grain wrap filled with the following: chickpea salad, soy-curl chik'n salad, hummus, fat-free refried beans, veggie burgers, baked/flavored tofu, smokey tempeh strips (for a BLT style), tomatoes, sprouts or lettuce. Don't forget the classic peanut butter and fruit or jelly because this is also a winner for many kids! Left-overs were also a popular option with our kids so making bigger meals ahead or batch cooking was always a helpful idea. Because the microwaves at school are often limited, pre-heat left-overs and store them in thermoses.
- 4. Crunchy or Sweet:** I suppose this category can be left out, but kids enjoy this component and sometimes these options are great for snacks early or late in the day.
 - **Crunchy ideas:** Baked chickpeas, baked tortilla chips, baked potato chunks, peanuts, popcorn, rice cakes, or whole grain crackers.
 - **Sweeter treats:** Muffins, cookies/bars, granola, applesauce cups, (plant-based) chocolate pudding, or soy/coconut yogurts.





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Time and Money Saving Tips

- 1. Storage Containers:** Buy plenty of different sized baggies, containers, thermoses, and water bottles for storage. There are some great lunch box storage options online. It's definitely worth the initial investment to have plenty on hand for easy assembly, clean up, and organization. Don't forget to initial the containers with a sharpie so they come back to you at the end of the day.
- 2. Prepare Ahead:** Have fruits/veggies washed, prepared, and bagged the night before.
- 3. Use dips/dressings** that you have on hand. You can buy some really delicious salsas at the market or make batches of hummus (hummus freezes well) or jars of dressing on the weekend.
- 4. Double up** when making meals and store the leftovers for lunchboxes. Chili, soups, and stews make great lunchbox meals.
- 5. Batch Cook** pasta, quinoa, rice, potatoes, beans, sauces, and veggie burgers over the weekend. These make great 'left over' meals for lunches and are especially delicious topped with salsa or guacamole using the 'dip' component of the lunchbox.
- 6. Convenience:** If your kids prefer sandwiches/wraps, make the fillings or find convenient plant-based fillers such as hummus, tofu, and vegan burgers at the market.
- 7. Bake ahead:** Make muffins and cookies ahead (you can even include children in this process) and freeze them. Freezing cookies and muffins is an excellent way to preserve your cooking efforts and it's so easy to grab and go.

Oops, I forgot my lunch!

I heard these words more times than I can count. The public (and many private) school lunch programs will surely lead a plant-based parent to worry. Assuming there isn't a salad bar or a vegan entrée regularly available, you can contact the school cafeteria and kindly let them know your child forgot his/her lunch and ask for a plant-based (or vegan) option. If they know ahead of time, they might be willing to put together something healthy.

We need to remember that children need calories to get through the school-day. Here are tips to teach them about how to pick their lunch from the options available in a typical cafeteria:

1. Ask for a sandwich option. It might be on white bread but most school lunch programs will offer PB & J or sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce on a roll.
2. Check out the side vegetables. There is usually corn, green beans, cabbage, peas, or mixed vegetables.
3. See if there is a rice or potato option to pair with the side veggie. They can also ask for double servings of the starch or veggies for a heartier meal.
4. Beans are sometimes an option on certain hot lunches.
5. Most schools offer apples, bananas, or oranges.

If they forget their lunch and the cafeteria option is not great, you might find them forgetting their lunch less often. Kids will take responsibility for their meals at an early age if the consequence is undesirable.



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Sensitivity in the Cafeteria

Last but not least, we need to be aware that many plant-based kids strive to be like their peers. Many kids (and adults) don't like drawing attention to their plant-based lunch box and would prefer their food to look mainstream, creating as little commentary from peers as possible. Although times are changing and more parents are feeding their kids healthier foods, for most schools-aged kids, we have a ways to go. I had one child who preferred their lunches to look mainstream. In that case, I stuck with sandwiches, wraps, soups, and entrees that were traditional. Keep in mind, they usually grow out of this stage if you can roll with it for a while. Food should not become a stressful issue, so relax and let your child help guide you in preparing healthy 'comfortable' lunch situations.

Additional Resources for Building Plant-Based Lunches

- 10 Creatively Plant Based Lunchbox Ideas, by Fork and Beans. This post contains creative and tasty plant-based meal ideas for packing lunches for kids. <http://www.forkandbeans.com/2016/09/13/10-creatively-plant-based-lunchbox-ideas/>
- [Packing Vegan Lunches](http://7dayvegan.com/vegan-lunches/), by Dreena Burton of "Plant Powered Kitchen." This article includes tips from Dreena Burton on packing plant-based lunches (hot and cold) for school and home, as well as links to recipes for more inspiration. <http://7dayvegan.com/vegan-lunches/>
- [Easy Plant-based Vegan School Lunch Ideas](https://www.veggiesdontbite.com/easy-plant-based-vegan-school-lunch-ideas/), by Sophia at "Veggies Don't Bite." This blog post presents several recipes for packing school lunches and includes links to Sophia's favorite lunch box and water bottle brands for kids. <https://www.veggiesdontbite.com/easy-plant-based-vegan-school-lunch-ideas/>
- [5 Tips to Simplify your Lunch Box Routine and Printable](http://myplantbasedfamily.com/tag/lunchbox/), by Holly at "My Plant-Based Family." This blog post includes a list of printable ideas of what to put in your children's lunch box. <http://myplantbasedfamily.com/tag/lunchbox/>

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