Easy Back-To-School Lunches

BY LAUREN CHATTMAN © 2015, Newsday

When my youngest child leaves for college in two years, I'll miss her. But I won't miss packing her lunchbox every day. If only I had had the foresight to assign this task to my kids when they entered kindergarten.

If you have little ones, don't make the same mistake. Have them pack their own lunches from the get-go, and you'll save yourself a lot of time and grief. You'll also give them the sense of empowerment that goes along with making their own decisions. When they take responsibility for their lunches, kids also learn something about food preparation and healthy eating.

Before handing them brown bags and telling them to get going, prepare them, and yourself, with these three tips:

1. SET NUTRITIONAL GUIDELINES

You don't want your kid throwing a Twinkie and a can of soda in a sack before heading for the bus stop. Before they pack their first lunch, explain that a balanced meal includes protein, carbohydrates, fruit or vegetables and a reasonable treat. Each category should be checked off mentally or on an actual checklist as they put the food in a lunchbox or bag.

2. STOCK THE FRIDGE AND PANTRY

There are no quick and healthy lunches without the right ingredients. Once or twice a week, restock your refrigerator and pantry with the protein, carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables and snacks that your kids like. Slice rolls in half before freezing, cut up vegetables, if necessary, stock a basket or drawer with chips, raisins and pretzels. Make a batch of trail mix or granola bars for the



3. MAKE PACKING SUPPLIES ACCES-

Keep small containers for snacks and sandwiches, plastic forks and knives, and paper napkins all in one place, near the lunchboxes and water bottles. Have several icepacks in the freezer to keep lunches cold all morning.

Some Easy Lunches

Making lunch doesn't have to mean a lot of slicing and dicing. Even a 5-year-old can

> put together one of the following protein and carbohydrate combinations, no chef's knife necessary.

TURKEY AND HUMMUS WRAPS

Hummus is easy to spread on a flatbread or tortilla. Top with a few slices of turkey and maybe some lettuce leaves, roll up and

IMAGE: METRO GRAPHICS — voila! — lunch is done.

PEANUT BUTTER AND ...

Another spread-and-go option. If your child doesn't like jelly, provide something like honey, banana (easy to cut with a butter knife), bacon (precooked by you in the microwave), pickles. There's a combination for everyone.

GOAT CHEESE AND SALAMI ON A ROLL

Slice crusty sandwich rolls before freezing them, so they're always on hand. Your child can spread goat cheese on one side, top with salami, wrap in plastic, and let the sandwich defrost in the lunchbox. For a vegetarian alternative, skip the salami and spread some pesto on the other side of the roll.

> HAM, CHEESE AND MUSTARD **ON WHOLE-GRAIN BREAD**

Whole-grain bread, with lots of seeds, gives any sandwich a nutritional boost.

Keep a loaf in the freezer. A slice or two of ham and real cheese (I like Cabot's Cheddar slices) make a hearty filling.

GUACAMOLE, BLACK BEANS AND CORN CHIPS

Buy chips designed for scooping, so your child can pack them along with small containers of guacamole and drained canned black beans.

BOX-FREEZING AND PACKING HOMEMADE GRANOLA BARS

There's no comparison between the taste of store-bought and homemade granola bars. If you and your child work to make your own. you know exactly what's going into them and can customize them to your child's tastes. Use 3/4 cup of any combination of nuts and seeds that you'd like. Use whole-wheat flour instead of white flour. Swap in honey or molasses for the maple syrup. Substitute raisins, cranberries, dried blueberries or chocolate chips for the dried cherries.

Once your bars are cooled, cut them and wrap each one separately in plastic wrap. Put the wrapped bars in a zipper-lock bag or airtight container and place in the freezer. Bars can go straight from the freezer into the lunchbox, either the night before or the morning of a school day. (For a recipe for cherry and maple granola bars, see newsday. com/food)

CHERRY AND MAPLE GRANOLA BARS

3/4 cup old-fashioned rolled oats (not instant)

- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts
- 1/4 cup unsalted pumpkin seeds 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch nutmeg
- 1/2 cup canola oil
- 1/4 cup pure maple syrup
- 1/4 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup dried cherries
- 1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line an 8-inch-square baking pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil, making sure the foil is tucked into all the corners and that there is at least 1 inch overhanging the top of the pan on all
- 2. Spread the oats, nuts and pumpkin sunflower seeds on a baking sheet and bake until they are lightly toasted, stirring once or twice with a spoon, about 10 minutes. Remove the pan from the oven and let the mixture cool completely.
- 3. Combine the flour, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg in a small mixing
- 4. Combine the oil, maple syrup and brown sugar in a large mixing bowl, and mix until smooth. Stir in the egg and vanilla. Stir $\,$

in the flour mixture until it is just combined. Stir in the oat mixture until well combined. Stir in the dried cherries.

5. Pour the batter into the prepared baking pan. Bake the bars until they are set, 25to 30 minutes. Let them cool completely on a wire rack.

6. Grasping the overhanging foil on either side of the pan, lift out the bars and place them on a cutting board. Cut them into 16 squares. The bars will keep at room temperature in an airtight container for up to 5 days. Makes 16 bars.





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