

# The Lunch Box



Children look forward to school lunches that have been planned especially for them. Appeal to your child's taste buds and appetite by keeping foods simple, adding contrast and variety, and preparing small serving sizes.

## Keep foods simple

Simple and easy to eat foods interest young children. Foods that children can open and eat easily will help them develop self-confidence and independence when eating their meals.



University of California  
Cooperative Extension  
San Luis Obispo County



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## Add Contrast and Variety



Using lots of colors, flavors, textures and shapes will make lunches more tempting.

**Color**—Include foods with at least two colors from the rainbow along with neutral colors from grains, meats, and dairy products.

**Texture**—Include soft foods (*bread, lunch meats, rice, pasta*) and something crunchy or crisp (*fresh fruits and vegetables, chopped nuts, crackers*).

**Flavors**—Children usually prefer mild tasting foods to strong and spicy flavors. Each week select a variety of mild flavors for sandwich fillings, breads, fruits, vegetables, and cheeses.

**Shapes**—Perk up a lunch box by cutting sandwiches and other foods into strips, circles, or triangles. Consider adding some foods that naturally come in interesting shapes like the “trees” of broccoli, the “bouquets” of cauliflower, and the “rings” of sliced bell peppers.



## Small Serving Sizes

When it comes to serving sizes, think small. Small children have small stomachs that can only hold small amounts of food.

*The Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children* recommends the following small serving sizes for 4-5 year olds. Children ages 2-3 should be offered slightly smaller servings, except for milk.



### Grains: 6 servings a day

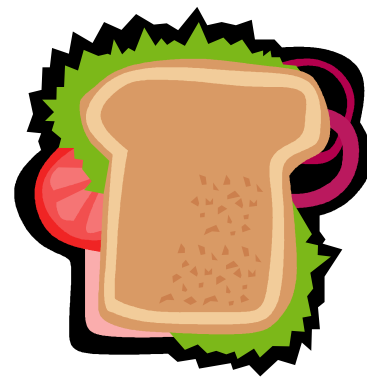
- One small slice of bread
- ½ cup of cooked rice or pasta
- ½ cup cooked cereal
- 1 cup ready-to-eat cereal
- 1 small tortilla
- 1 small muffin
- ½ English muffin or small bagel
- 2 graham cracker squares
- 6 crackers (*saltine size*)
- ½ hamburger or hot dog bun

½ Cup = the size of a cupcake wrapper  
1 Cup = the size of an 8 oz. yogurt cup



### Vegetables: 3 servings a day

- ½ cup cooked vegetables
- ½ cup chopped raw vegetables
- 1 cup raw leafy greens



### Fruit: 2 servings a day

- 1 small whole fruit (*about the size of a tennis ball*)
- ¾ cup 100% fruit juice (*small juice can—6 oz.*)
- ½ cup canned fruit
- ¼ cup dried fruit



### Milk & Milk Products: 2 servings a day

- (*low and reduced fat varieties are recommended for most children 2 years and older.*)
- 1 cup milk or yogurt
  - 1 1/2 ounces cheese (*about the size of 3 dominos*)

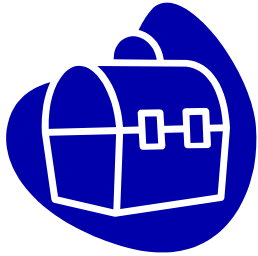


### Meat & Meat Alternatives: 2 servings a day

- 2-3 ounces lean meat or fish (*about the size of a deck a cards*)
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup cooked dried beans
- 4 tablespoons of peanut butter
- 2/3 cup nuts or seeds (*size of a 6 oz. tuna can*)

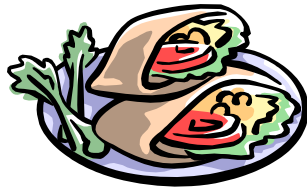
**Hint:** You may find that a whole serving is too much for one meal. When that's the case, use another meal or snack to offer the rest of the serving. For example: Serve a half tuna sandwich for lunch, then serve graham crackers with peanut butter for snack. The tuna and peanut butter together will make a whole serving of meat or meat alternatives.

## Will my child be hungry if I send small serving sizes for lunch?



Probably not. Start the day by serving a healthy breakfast at home. Morning and afternoon snacks are offered at most preschools. With the healthy breakfast and snacks, a lunch with child size servings will keep your child satisfied throughout the day.

### New Foods



Before putting a new food in your child's lunch, try it at home first. If it's liked, include it in the lunch.

### Too Much Food



Sending too much food in your child's lunch will probably result in food waste and may encourage your child to overeat.

### Did you know?

- \*Toddlers and preschoolers grow more slowly than infants and they are usually not as hungry as infants.
- \*Children's appetites vary from day to day depending on their activity and their growth.
- \*Don't worry if your child occasionally doesn't eat a meal. What's most important is that children eat a balanced diet over a 3-4 day period.

## Lunch Ideas

Simple lunches can combine a variety of textures, colors, shapes and flavors.

6 Crackers with Cheese  
Broccoli Trees  
Orange Wedges  
Water

½ Roast Beef & Cheese Sandwich  
Bell Pepper Rings  
6 Animal Crackers  
Low-Fat milk

Be safe—pack these lunches in insulated containers with a frozen ice pack.



## Ideas from Parents

“A half of a sandwich seems to be plenty for my 4 year old.” Nipomo Parent

“I serve small portions, easy to eat, colorful, always changing.” San Luis Obispo Parent

“Dipping sliced apples in orange or pineapple juice before packing prevents the apples from turning brown.” Arroyo Grande Parent

“Make sandwiches in fun shapes using a cookie cutter.” Arroyo Grande Parent

“Have children help pack their own lunches.” Nipomo Parent

“I ask my daughter her favorite sandwiches, fruits and vegetables. That way I know she’ll enjoy her lunch.” San Luis Obispo Parent



## Something Special

Children will enjoy an occasional surprise in their lunches.  
Consider adding a non-food item that says “You are special!”



Here are few ideas for that special something:

Picture of the family or a pet  
Note from home  
Colorful or holiday napkin  
Sticker



Or consider an educational theme weekly and work it into the lunch several times during the week. Theme ideas could include a:

Word  
Color  
Shape  
Scent  
Number  
Letter

## More Information

For more information on packing nutritious lunches for your child,  
log on to [www.usda.gov/cnpp](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp)

*The Lunch Box* is a series of handouts designed for San Luis Obispo County parents who pack lunches for their preschool children. The goal of these handouts is to assist parents in packing lunches that are nutritious, safe and appealing for preschool children.

The author acknowledges the cooperation of nine San Luis Obispo County preschools that assisted in the development of the Lunch Box Program.

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