

Packing Lunches, Honestly

Everything I've figured out feeding my crowd before 7 a.m.
The list is on the back.

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price I paid →



I was a lunch lady. That changed how I pack.

I worked in a school cafeteria for a few years, right up until recently, and you want to know how much food gets thrown away? I saw it with my own eyes. I'm not saying kids don't eat their veggies — a lot of them do. But a lot of them don't, and those kids aren't eating anything else either, because it all went in the trash together.

So I'd rather they eat something.

I know this is going to make some mamas mad at me. A bag of chips that actually gets eaten does more for a kid sitting in fourth period than a beautiful lunch that came home sealed. That's the whole argument. That's the only reason this list looks the way it looks.

I am not doing this at 6:15 in the morning.

I'm not portioning anything into little containers, and I'm not doing it the night before either. Let's just be real — I'm not going to do it. So everything I buy comes in its own pack, and packing a lunch is grabbing five things and dropping them in a bag.

Only buy the fruit they'll actually eat.

This is the rule I'd give anybody. If I buy fruit they won't touch, I paid for it twice — once at the register and once in the trash. Buy the one they eat. Even if it's not the one you wish they ate.

The lunch bag I don't buy.

My kids carry their lunches in the plastic grocery bags that come home from Walmart or Publix. They already exist and they cost me nothing. Our kids have a refrigerator in their classroom, so the whole bag goes straight in when they get to school. If your school doesn't have one, the USDA says to use an insulated bag with two cold sources — one on top of the food, one underneath.

What if your kids eat sandwiches?

Mine don't, and I wish they did — it's such an easy thing to put in a lunch. But if yours do, you're in better shape than I am. The sandwich just slots in where my protein goes and everything else on this sheet stays exactly the same.

Last night's dinner is tomorrow's lunch.

This is honestly how I get something halfway decent into them. Baked potato, lasagna, a casserole, stir fry — they like it better than anything I could have packed on purpose, and it costs nothing extra because I already cooked it. I send it in cheap take-along containers. If one doesn't come home, I don't lose a minute of sleep over it.

About \$4.75 a lunch

One thing from each column comes out right around \$4.75. Less than five dollars, and I didn't have to get up any earlier. Some days it's more, some days it's a dollar. That's what makes it work on a real week instead of a perfect one.

The Lunchbox Lineup

Pick one from each column. That's a lunch, and it takes about a minute.

These are the ones my kids actually eat. Write yours in the blanks.

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1. Something Crunchy

The one that always gets eaten.

- ☐ Pirate's Booty
- ☐ Goldfish cheddar
- ☐ Cheez-Its
- ☐ Pretzels

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

2. Something with Protein

The one I refuse to skip.

- ☐ Beef sticks
- ☐ Korean BBQ snack bites
- ☐ Nut bars
- ☐ Cheese stick

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

3. Something Fruit

Only what they'll actually eat.

- ☐ Apples
- ☐ Fruit snacks
- ☐ Grapes
- ☐ Mandarin oranges

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

4. Something Sweet

Small, cheap, comes home empty.

- ☐ Mini muffin bites
- ☐ Hello Panda cookies
- ☐ Famous Amos cookies
- ☐ Rice Krispies Treat

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

5. Something to Drink

Ours get one splurge a month.

- ☐ Sparkling water
- ☐ Water bottle
- ☐ Juice box
- ☐ Milk at school

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

+ Last Night's Dinner

The best lunch I never packed.

- ☐ Baked potato
- ☐ Lasagna
- ☐ Casserole
- ☐ Stir fry

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____