



## Lunch Box Tips for Parents: What to Pack for Young Children in Childcare

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Foods in children's lunch boxes can provide the nutrients children need to support their growth and development. Those foods also provide children with enjoyment and pleasure at mealtimes, especially when children are given the opportunity to taste and eat foods they like, while also being exposed to new foods.

Here are suggestions that offer safe foods and optimize nutrients in a child's lunch:

- Never pack foods that are choking hazards. These include:
  - Hard raw vegetables and fruits such as raw carrot sticks or raw celery sticks
  - Whole grapes
  - Nuts and seeds
  - Firm, hard raisins or other dried fruit
  - Hot dogs
  - Large chunks of cheese or meat
  - Hard candy and chewing gum
  - Chunks of peanut butter
  - Marshmallows
- Prevent choking. Chop food into cubes that are no bigger than ½ inch diameter for children over three and ¼ inch for children under three.
- Aim to offer foods from low-fat meat and dairy sources.
- Select whole grain breads, cereals, and crackers.
- Offer fruits and vegetables.
- Carefully select beverages that are high in nutrients. Milk is the preferred beverage for children. Check to see if your child's center offers milk, or at least refrigeration for the lunch box, so that you can send milk for your child. If you send fruit juice in the lunch box, send 100% fruit juice, not juice cocktails or juice punch.
- Children's lunch boxes can include a dessert that is healthy and nutritious. Examples are oatmeal cookies, or pudding that has added (fortified) calcium. Read labels.
- Avoid packing foods that are high risk for causing food borne illness, unless the center has equipment to keep cold foods cold and equipment to reheat foods to appropriate temperatures. Even the best lunch boxes rarely keep foods cold enough to be safe.
- **These foods must be kept cold during storage:** milk, hummus, cheese spreads, dressing or dips, lunch meat, yogurt, eggs, cheese, pasta salad, juice box or reheated leftover meals such as lasagna/spaghetti, cooked vegetables, soup, chili, casseroles, cooked vegetables.  
**These foods are safe at room temperature:** crackers, whole fruits, cereal, bread sticks, unopened fruit cups, scones, muffins, breads.



## Foods to Pack in Lunchboxes for Children in Child Care

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**Select one from each category below**

### SANDWICH/ENTRÉE/SOUP

Thinly spread peanut butter and jelly sandwich Tuna, turkey, ham, beef, cheese or egg salad sandwich Hummus pita or wrap Chicken noodle or tomato soup Cream cheese sandwich Fish filet sandwiches *Chopped boiled eggs	Chili Lasagna/spaghetti/ravioli Pizza *Chicken pasta salad Tortilla with cheese and refried beans Chicken or turkey wrap Black beans and rice
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### GRAIN/BREADS

Graham crackers Fish crackers Scones Muffins Biscuits Cornbread	Cereal English muffins Pita bread *Granola bar Couscous salad Rice
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### FRUIT

Whole bananas *Peeled and sliced peaches, apricots, pears, and plum *Strawberry quartered Tangerine, orange, or grapefruit sections *Raspberries Cooked apples	Blueberries *Fruit cups in water or light syrup *Dehydrated fruit *Pineapple chopped into quarter inch cubes Kiwi *Blackberries quartered *Mango and papaya
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### VEGETABLE

Cooked green beans *Chopped salad with dressing (spinach, lettuce) *Slivered carrots *Cucumbers chopped in 1/4 inch cubes *Shredded jicama and dip	Potato wedges Sliced tomatoes *Chopped red, yellow, and orange peppers Cooked broccoli Corn *Black and green chopped olives
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### MILK/DAIRY

Milk *String cheese or cheese in 1/4 or 1/2 inch cubes	Cottage cheese Yogurt
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### BEVERAGE

Milk Flavored Milk	Water 100% Fruit Juice
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\*Be sure to prepare these foods to prevent choking hazards. For children under age three, chop into pieces no bigger than 1/4 inch in diameter. For children under age five, chop into pieces no bigger than 1/2 inch in diameter.