Sending a lunch box along with your child to a child care program connects you, your child, and the child care staff in an intimate way. Eating is essential to survival.

Supporting children to be healthy and happy around mealtimes is an adult responsibility that is dependent upon both the parent and the staff. Here are suggestions for building a bridge among parents, staff, and the children who eat the food from the lunch box.

- Ask about meal service style. Find out if the program provides beverages or partial meals, utensils, napkins, or plates.

- Ask staff if the program has a refrigerator to store lunch box food that must be maintained at a cool temperature. If yes, find out how to access the refrigerator when you bring your child’s lunch box to the program.

- Ask if the program has a way to heat foods that must be cooked. If yes, use microwave-safe containers. Read container packaging to be certain.

- Present items in an easy-to-eat fashion that is friendly to a child’s mouth and chewing and swallowing skills. For example, cut sandwiches into four quarters. Slice pizza into small squares. Offer items that do not require slicing or peeling. Remember the teacher has many children to help at the meal. The teacher will also be helping keep children safe and happy, as well as supporting them in getting their food ready to eat.

- Keep serving sizes small. Watch your child eat at home, and then pack about that size portion for lunch. Ask how much your child typically eats at the child care program.

- Pack foods that can make your child feel successful. Think about your child’s skills for opening items independently.

- Be considerate to your child’s teacher. Pack items that are reasonably easy to open and that do not require a lot of preparation. Use wax paper instead of plastic wrap, for example. Plastic wrap sticks together while wax paper does not. Practice at home with children to open containers. If you buy prepackaged foods, snip the seals before putting them in the lunch box. For foods that are highly packaged, empty the food into an easy to open container before you put the food in the lunch box.

- When food in the lunch box needs to be refrigerated, be sure to follow the center’s rules for getting the lunch box in the cooler.

- Check to be certain water for the children to drink is readily available at the table.
Choose foods that represent good nutrition. Offer meats dairy, fruits, vegetables, and grains. Offer these in the lunchbox, and trust the teacher to help your child learn to eat these foods.

Be careful of emotional decision making about what goes into the meal. Sometimes parents feel guilty about leaving their children, and try to make up for that guilt by filling a lunch box with treats. Remember...this is the child’s nutrition for a large portion of the day. Thoughtfully choose the best food you can for your child.

Some child care programs encourage staff to return uneaten food in the lunch box. This is a hazard to your child. Though you may be able to see what your child ate, the chance of food borne illness is present in food that has been tasted. Do not re-use the food. Discard the food, and clean the lunch box thoroughly. Note: Sometimes children are hungry or cranky on the way home from child care. Resist the dangerous temptation to feed the child food from the already used lunch box.

You will want to know what your child ate at their child care meal(s). Ask staff if the center might provide you with a daily eating sheet that helps you know how much the child ate.

Clean your child’s lunch box daily. Be sure to use a disinfectant.

Pack a little extra love in the lunchbox. Send a token of your affection in the lunch box. This can be a little picture you draw on a piece of paper, a simple note, a picture of you printed from the computer, or something you cut out of the news or from a magazine.