

## **BALANCING BACK-TO-SCHOOL LUNCH BOXES**

*Term Time Tips from Dr. Catherine Logan, Nutrition Manager, National Dairy Council*



Children can get bored with school lunches, creating a ‘balancing challenge’ between providing a variety of interesting foods they enjoy; and eating a healthy, balanced diet which meets the nutritional requirements specific for their needs and life-stage.

Dr. Catherine Logan, Nutrition Manager with the National Dairy Council, provides some advice to help you establish a positive, healthy diet and lifestyle among the school-goers in your house. Whether they are starting school for the first time, making the transition from primary to secondary school or simply returning to a familiar routine, these ‘Back to School Tips,’ small break and sandwich suggestions may give you some food for thought.

### **Balance**

The arrival of the new school year is an excellent time to stop and take a closer look at the food and dietary habits of your family. A healthy, balanced diet during childhood and the teenage years is essential for healthy growth and development.

The Department of Health’s Food Pyramid, which is aimed at adults and children over the age of five years, provides a guide to healthy eating. While this is a suitable guide for children over five years of age, it is important to note that children’s appetites vary. Smaller children are likely to need smaller servings, which should be increased towards the recommendations in the Food Pyramid as the child asks for more, in accordance with the child’s own growth and appetite.

### **Meal Patterns & Snacks**

Try to establish a routine around meals: three meals per day, plus snacks as required. While many people perceive snacking as a bad habit, ‘snacks’ can actually play an important role in the diet. This is particularly relevant to some children who, due to their relatively small body size, may only be able to eat small volumes of food. Food choices are critical, however.

Snack foods should be nutritious and selected in the context of each individual’s overall diet and lifestyle. Some great examples include fresh fruit - whole or mixed fruit salad, yogurt, a glass of milk, small wholemeal scone, crackers or crisp bread with hummus or cheese, bite-size vegetable pieces such as cherry tomatoes, chopped carrots or cucumber sticks perhaps with a yogurt or hummus dip.

### **Dairy**

Options from the ‘milk, yogurt and cheese’ food group are popular among children and parents alike. These versatile foods can easily be incorporated into the diet throughout the school day - for example, milk over breakfast cereal in the morning, cheese in sandwiches or in a pasta salad as part of a healthy lunchbox or a pot of yogurt at break-time. This food group offers a range of nutrients and is recognised as a particularly important source of calcium which is needed for normal growth and development of bone in children and the maintenance of normal bones.

Adolescence is a particularly important life-stage for bone health. It has been reported that about half of an adult's bone mass is built up during this short time-frame. The Department of Health's Food Pyramid recommends three servings from the 'milk, yogurt and cheese' food group per day as part of a balanced diet, increasing to five daily servings for those aged 9-18 years due to the importance of calcium during this life-stage. Low-fat options are encouraged, and examples of one serving include 200ml of milk, 125ml of yogurt or 25g of hard cheese.

Vitamin D is also important for bone health and, additionally, contributes to the normal absorption of calcium. Known as 'the sunshine vitamin', vitamin D can be made from the action of sunlight on the skin. However, dietary intake of vitamin D is also important, especially in the context of the Irish weather combined with the increased understanding that people need to protect their skin against exposure to strong sunlight. Food sources include oily fish such as mackerel and salmon, eggs and dairy foods fortified with vitamin D.

Parents and guardians may wish to check if their child's school is registered with the School Milk Scheme which is a convenient and affordable way to help your child meet their recommended intake from the 'milk, yogurt and cheese' food group.

### **Activity and Lifestyle**

National guidelines advise that children and young people (2-18 years of age) should be active, at a moderate to vigorous level, for at least 60 minutes every day. This can include sport, active play and PE, as well as every day activities such as cycling. Muscle-strengthening, flexibility and bone-strengthening exercises should be included three times a week.

It is best to establish healthy lifestyle and eating habits from a young age and set a good example for your child by acting as a positive role model. Encouraging these behaviours and presenting them as the norm to children will help establish an ideal foundation for them to build upon.

### **Lunchbox Tips**

Children can get bored with school lunches quickly and quite easily.

Try to introduce a variety of foods, encourage a range of tastes and present foods in an appealing way.

If you are introducing something new, try it at home first, rather than simply introducing it in the school lunchbox.

Try to check early in the year if your child's school has any particular policies or guidelines around foods which can be brought to school or packed in lunches.

No doubt, school days can be hectic, so setting aside some extra time during the weekend to plan for the week ahead is definitely worth while! Perhaps involve your child in planning for and making the school lunches, this will encourage them to take an interest in food as well as ensuring the foods they like are included.

### **Packing It All In**

What to include in the lunchbox for 'small break' and combining variety with nutritional value for sandwiches are two particular challenges when it comes to packed lunches. Here are some ideas -

and remember - choices and portion sizes should be adapted to suit your child's specific age and lifestyle.

### **Small Break Suggestions:**

- Whole fruit – for instance select from banana, apple, orange, pear, 2 small fruits
- Cheddar cheese and crispbread or unsalted crackers
- Vegetable sticks – for instance celery, carrots, peppers with hummus dip
- Mixed fresh fruit salad
- Natural yogurt with a pot of mixed berries or fresh fruit
- Small wholemeal scone
- Homemade vegetable soup
- Small box of dried fruit
- Pot of yogurt

It is important that children drink enough fluids throughout the day, so include a drink at small break. Water and milk are considered the best choices - and are suitable between meals and snacks.

### **Sandwich Filling Suggestions:**

- Tuna with chopped mixed peppers and light mayo
- Cheddar cheese with green salad leaves and tomato relish
- Chicken salad - green salad leaves, sliced cucumber, tomato
- Chopped or mashed boiled egg with spinach leaves and light mayo
- Turkey with sweetcorn and crunchy peppers
- Tuna with chopped red onion, sweetcorn and light mayo
- Grated cheese and sliced tomato
- Hummus and mixed vegetables – chopped peppers, chopped tomatoes and sweetcorn
- Chicken with crunchy peppers and mild salsa-type relish

Try choosing different types of bread - for example: sliced pan bread, bread roll, sliced soda bread, tortilla wrap, pitta pocket, bagel. Remember, wholemeal varieties are recommended.

Salads are also delicious alternatives to sandwiches. You can add a carbohydrate food such as pasta or serve with bread – again, opt for higher fibre carbohydrate sources.

### **Ten Tips for Back to School Time:**

#### **Tip 1:**

The Food Pyramid recommendations for the 'milk, yogurt and cheese' food group increase to 5-a-day for those aged 9-18 years. A school day which begins with a high-fibre breakfast cereal and milk; includes a cheese sandwich as part of a healthy lunchbox; and a carton of yogurt as an afternoon snack can go a long way to help meeting this recommendation.

#### **Tip 2:**

School mornings are often hectic in many households so a little time planning during the weekends for the week ahead can help lighten the load. And, don't forget to check there is enough milk for breakfast the evening before!

**Tip 3:**

A good night's sleep can do wonders... for children and adults! So, make sure everyone in your house is getting enough sleep. If confused or concerned about the amount of sleep your child needs, chat with your doctor or a medical professional. Think about changes which could be made to the family's routine to make earlier nights possible.

**Tip 4:**

It is important that your child learns to manage their time well throughout the school year. Ample time should be allocated to school and homework as well as the fun stuff such as sport and playtime. It can be helpful to get a wall calendar or planner at the beginning of the school year and mark important dates so that they are allowed for well in advance. It's all about balance.

**Tip 5:**

Many Irish children and teenagers are eating the wrong balance of foods, which can affect their health and wellbeing. The Food Pyramid, which is aimed at adults and children over five years of age, provides a guide to healthy eating - helping you to ensure your family achieves the right balance of nutritious foods in their diet.

**Tip 6:**

Sport can be a great way to alleviate stress and boost health... good to know especially after a day spent restricted in a classroom! It is recommended that children and young people (2-18 yrs) be active, at a moderate to vigorous level, for at least 60 minutes every day. So students, be sure to sign up for your favourite after-school activities early in the year. Parents can help by organising, or even participating, in such activities. Arranging transport with nearby families can also help; and don't forget... cheering them on!

**Tip 7:**

It is worth enquiring early in the year if your child's school has a policy or guidelines on what can and can't be included in packed lunches. Avoid boredom with packed lunches by introducing variety, offering a range of tastes and presenting foods in interesting ways. Remember to base choices on healthy eating guidelines and try to involve your child in making the school lunches.

**Tip 8:**

It is important that children drink enough fluids throughout the day. Water and milk are considered the best choices and are suitable between meals and snacks.

**Tip 9:**

Before tackling that all important homework, an after-school snack may be on the cards. While some people perceive 'snacking' as a bad habit - it can actually play an important role in the diet, especially for some children who, due to their relatively small body size, can only eat small amounts of food in one sitting. However, food choices are critical – snacks should be nutritious and based on the individual's overall diet and lifestyle. Some great examples are: fresh fruit, yogurt, vegetable sticks with a hummus or yogurt dip, small wholemeal scone or bowl of homemade vegetable soup.

**Tip 10:**

How many times have you heard "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day"? Good choices at breakfast time can go a long way to help your family achieve their recommended intake of essential nutrients. Try a high-fibre ready-to-eat cereal with milk or porridge made with milk. If possible, make it a family meal. A structured eating routine is recommended – so, what better way than to start the day with a nutritious, family breakfast.