



What to give kids for lunch

September 24, 2007

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FAMILY ISSUES REPORTER

You never know what challenges will unite parents. But apparently, the dreaded lunchbox dilemma is an international parenting phenomenon.

At least according to Margret Primc of Australia, who says even folks Down Under fret over finding healthy lunch fare their offspring will actually eat.

The Sydney mom was one of the first to respond last week to our pleas for help in coming up with lunches that: aren't too hard to open; are "cool" enough to consume; don't smell; don't look strange; don't involve too many Tupperware lids; and aren't too boring to bother with.

A tall order. But we did get some helpful feedback. And among it all, some trends emerged:

For nutrition and variety, don't forget "add-ons" in sandwiches. Dietitian and mother Kathy Furgala suggests alternating slivers of sweet onion, grated carrots, shredded cheese, cucumbers, lots of lettuce and anything else they like. And, of course, mix it up with bread, croissants, wraps, buns and bagels.

Meatballs. Primc makes batches, freezes them and puts them in the lunches with some dipping sauce, or folds them into a wrap with shredded cheese and vegetables.

Dinner leftovers. This is standard fare in some households and can include pasta, rice, stir-fries or cold roasted meat and raw veggies. All you need is a microwave, a thermos and a fork. One mom said she regularly cooks extras and disguises

last night's dinner in the lunchboxes by topping it with melted cheese or ketchup.

Cream cheese as the new p.b. Some of us are still mourning the end of childhood's most reliable lunch since peanut butter was outlawed in schools due to allergies. Remember it with jam, honey, bananas, lettuce or cucumber? The good news is you can combine cream cheese with almost as many partners. Spread it on soft tortillas with vegetables, cheeses, salsa or meat. Try cream cheese and jam sandwiches or pair it with cucumber, sliced apples or blueberries.

Homemade quesadillas or pita pizzas. Prepare them the night before and in the morning heat them up (quesadillas in the frying pan, pizza in the oven). Wrap with foil to keep warm. It's a long way from the sandwich of Wonder Bread, butter and processed cheese that previous generations used to gobble up day after day without complaint.

Find yourself a nifty lunch container with compartments so your finicky kid only has to open one lid. Or wait a few months for the one Perry Rizzo's firm has designed. Rizzo, president of Axiom Group, a design, engineering and manufacturing firm in Aurora, is well-acquainted with the challenges of school lunches. He has four sons. At his wife's urging, his firm has designed a made-in-Canada product that will hit the shelves early next year. Called the ThermaPod, it has four compartments. See axiomplastics.com.

A few other survival tips from the trenches if after all this, the lunch is still coming home half-nibbled:

If you stumble upon something they like, take advantage while it lasts and give it to them at least three times a week.

Feed them a huge, hot breakfast.

Or even better, as reader Carolyn Richter suggests, ask what they're trading their lunch for. "This will give you next week's grocery list."

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