

Getting Clever with School Lunches (or How to make sure they're Eating Healthily When You're Not Watching!)

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There's no doubt that guiding your children towards lifelong healthy eating habits is one of the greatest gifts you can give. And when you consider school-age children eat around 25% of their food at school, and child obesity is growing alarmingly, we begin to appreciate the importance of ensuring lunch box food is both nutritious and balanced. Here's some guidelines to get you on track.

- Provide variety, not just in the type of food but also in taste, texture and colour. It's the best way to ensure a balanced, healthy lunchbox, as well as maintain interest. Provide small amounts of many different foods from all the food groups. Choose fruits and veggies in season – they offer good economic and nutritional value.
- Include whole and raw foods. In the busy school environment heavy demands are placed on young bodies, so children need foods that release energy at a steady rate to assist them through the ups and downs of school life, such as whole grains, nuts and seeds, as well as raw fruit and veggies. This will help them to settle, focus and concentrate, and sustain them when they're physically active.
- Exclude sugary, refined, and processed foods, and no juices or soft drinks either – fresh water is the very best drink of all – it costs nothing (usually) doesn't damage their teeth and as a bonus, it doesn't leave a sticky mess if it spills!
- Help children to learn and fulfil their potential through diet by including foods rich in Omega 3, such as Eggs and Salmon, and Antioxidants such as Blueberries and Dark Chocolate; all beneficial for cognitive function.
- Avoid packaged foods – they create litter and waste money. Use minimal, recyclable wraps, such as baking paper.
- Consider how to pack their lunch. Select foods that can be packed to survive the journey from home to school and still look tempting. Look for a sturdy lunch box container which can be easily cleaned, has compartments that suit the food, a cover to control temperature and a size and shape that fits comfortably into their school bag.

Here's a recipe for lunchboxes that can be prepared ahead and frozen so there's very little to do on busy school mornings, and it's perfect for kids who refuse 'greens' because the meatballs are packed

with spinach, one of the healthiest of leafy greens. My son hates greens, but he loves these, and some children won't even notice the spinach, it's so well hidden!

Beef & Spinach Meatballs

Makes 7 serves @ 4 meatballs each

500g **lean Minced Beef**

200g **frozen chopped Leaf Spinach**

1 teaspoon **minced Garlic** (about two cloves)

3 cups (250g) **grated Cheddar Cheese**

- Mix all the ingredients together.
- Pre-heat the oven to Moderate (180 degrees c/gas mark 4).
- Using about 2 tablespoons mix, roll into balls and place onto prepared baking trays. This should only take a few minutes.
- Cook for 20-30 minutes until nicely browned.
- Cool completely before freezing in a sealed container between layers of non-stick paper.

These are delicious served cold, perfect for hot weather. However, if you do want to serve them hot, wrap in foil and place in a Moderate oven for 20 minutes then put straight into the lunch box. If you use an insulated container, and pre-heat it with boiled water, they should stay hot until lunch-time.

Serve with pita bread or rice, a mixed salad and some organic egg mayonnaise.

The Clever Packed Lunch offers a simple, efficient system for providing healthy packed lunches for busy families. Edited and approved by a Nutritionist, the book includes 25 recipes and a complete two-week lunch menu, all photographed in colour.

In the book, Hazel shows that preparing a daily lunch containing home-made food is an opportunity to express love and at the same time to support our children through the challenges of school life by using healthy ingredients that encourage learning.

The book is available for purchase online at www.lunchideasforschool.com either in print or as an eBook. Or you can email hazel@lunchideasforschool.com for more information.

The eBook allows for grocery shopping and meal planning on the fly. It can be used on most mobile devices and comes free with the printed book.

