

Making Ripples

Back-to-School Bento Boxes

by Amanda Bancroft

Several readers have expressed frustration with finding affordable, quick, healthy food for their kids to eat. Now that it's time to go back to school, these foods must not only be cheap and convenient but also portable! And I know from experience that a brown bag doesn't always do the trick – especially when it's filled with plastic sandwich baggies that get thrown away each day. That repeat expense adds up in the landfill and budget alike. So why not give bento boxes a try?

“Bento” is a Japanese concept that means “packed lunch.” They are a traditional part of many Asian cultures, but are gaining popularity worldwide in many forms and under many labels. The best bentos have separate compartments for a wide variety of foods, with portion control in mind. One underlying principle of bento creation is that it should be attractive (not necessarily elaborate), and all the food groups should be represented to lend their colors and nourishment.

Not sure what produce to buy for your first bento boxes, or don't have time to chop every vegetable into bite-sized pieces? Check out Pauline's Back to School Produce Checklist at Ozark Natural Foods. “It's kind of a back to school produce shopping list that also helps you conveniently put together healthy meal options,” says Pauline. One of her favorite snacks is “ants on a log” – celery sticks filled with a safe nut butter (in case of peanut allergies) with raisin “ants” on top. For runny or liquid dips, the LunchBots watertight stainless steel condiment containers have been amazing at reducing spills and wasteful packaging in our bentos.

If your kids don't like anything that isn't sugar, try to model healthy eating. “Look enraptured as you crunch on carrots or kohlrabi and make satisfied ‘yum yum’ noises,” writes Eve Adamson for Stronger Together Co-op (www.StrongerTogether.Coop) A common obstacle for parents is not being able to afford produce, especially organic produce. If your family participates in a community garden like TriCycle Farms, you get to share in the harvest and your kids benefit in more ways than nutritionally. Or if the main blockade to healthy lunches is time, use weekends for bulk cooking and produce chopping, so during the week you can grab and go.

Finally, if you're at a place in life where these ideas just won't work for you and your family, then it's never too early to think about what will get you the type of healthy lunch you want, and start planning for it. Today's lunch is an investment in tomorrow's happiness.

For bento box recipes, books, videos and websites on bento box culture, visit Ripples blog. Feel free to share your bento ideas, too! What kind of bento will you make next?

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