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*“Packing the Perfect School Lunch”*

The summer has flown by, and it is already time for kids to head back to school! When organizing everything for the first day back, don't forget about the school lunchbox. Whether it is a soft-sided tote or a hard-plastic shell, an insulated lunch bag is a necessity for keeping packed food cold until lunchtime. Insulated lunch bags, when paired with an appropriately sized ice pack, keep perishable items like meat, cheese, and yogurt from spoiling. Since most schools don't refrigerate packed lunches, parents should check school policies and know how long lunches will sit before being eaten. “Food safety is a key factor,” says Karen Blakeslee, coordinator of K-State's Rapid Response Center for food science. “Keep cold foods cold, hot foods hot, and prevent cross-contamination, especially if your child or a classmate has food allergies.”

When packing lunches, try to make them easy to eat. Kids have limited time at lunch, so their meals should be efficient and nutritious. Include your children in packing their lunch, they are more likely to eat it that way, helping prevent food waste. Pre-packaged snacks like fruit cups, yogurt, and low-sugar snack bars are convenient to use but can be costly over time. Try making your own snacks by using small containers or containers with multiple separate compartments to separate items like sliced fruits, cheese cubes, crackers, and vegetables. These can be prepared in advance to make packing lunches easier throughout the week. Moisture-prone foods like deli sandwiches should be prepared in the morning before school to avoid sogginess. Reusable containers and bags are an easy way to reduce waste, but make sure younger kids are able to open them easily on their own.

When planning lunches, aim for a nutritious, balanced meal that includes a variety of food groups:

**Protein:** cheese sticks, yogurt, grilled chicken bites, nut butters

**Grains:** whole-grain crackers, pita bread, pretzels

**Fruits:** apple slices, grapes, berries, fruit cups in natural juice

**Vegetables:** baby carrots, cucumber slices, cherry tomatoes

When going grocery shopping, get a few ideas from your kids about items they want in their lunch. To avoid them picking out all packaged snack items, encourage them to choose 1 item from each food category. These few tips will ensure that your kids have a nutritious lunch all year long!

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.