

## There's something about lunch in a Montessori classroom...

Cafeteria style, it's not! In a Montessori classroom, preparing, serving, and cleaning up are all on the children's menu. What could be more meaningful to a young child's developing independence than mastering the skills required to meet a fundamental human need?

*"The essence of independence is to be able to do something for one's self."*  
Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

### Pack a Child's Lunch Montessori Style

Watch your child when he is accomplishing "real work" in the kitchen at home. Whether carefully slicing apples or arranging crackers topped with eggs on a tray, his face shines with purposeful concentration. Sharing the bounty with friends and family leaves him beaming with satisfaction!

You can provide support for such rewarding experiences daily, with a "lunch program" of your own. A Montessori-style bag lunch creates opportunities for children to apply at mealtime some of the functional skills they've experienced in classroom Practical Life activities: opening and closing (food containers), matching (cheese slices and crackers, for example), unfolding and folding (napkins and food wrappers), transferring with a spoon or tongs (berries to top a serving of yogurt, for example), and tidying up.

Prepare lunches the evening before, with the children if at all possible. They'll relish the opportunity to undertake an important role in caring for themselves in this way (and you'll appreciate one less item on your morning agenda). Giving children a chance to choose respects their food preferences and suits their eagerness to participate in family life.

### An interesting-looking lunch engages all their senses

A creative presentation of favorite foods makes for a fun, visually appealing lunch! Savvy parents pack sandwiches cut or pressed into fun shapes, carrot roses, and "ants on a log" (a celery stick filled with soy butter and topped with raisins) because children love them; that is, children who ignore ho-hum carrot sticks will happily munch a carrot curl or two.

Japanese-style bento boxes are great examples of lunches that emphasize small portions, variety, and fun. Preparing food as art -- and eating it! -- is very appealing to young children. Turn a carrot into a rose, a cherry tomato into a flower, a hard-boiled egg into a panda, or a hot dog into an octopus!

A quick browser search on Bento for Children will give you plenty of ideas for creative cutting (you) and arranging (your child). Scan for those using scoops, forks, and other utensils your child can manage.

### How to set up a child-friendly lunch preparation area at home

Establish shelves for lunch foods where children can reach, both in the cupboard and the refrigerator. Stock them with nutritious choices that appeal to your children. Introduce new foods now and then; when children are curious, they'll choose to pack the new food themselves (and be more likely to try it!).

Place the utensils and containers to be used nearby and within reach. Depending on children's ages and abilities, these might include:

- Fruit and vegetable slicers or choppers
- Egg slicer
- Blunt knife for spreading
- Small bowl and mixing spoon
- Cutting board
- Vegetable brush
- Spoon or scoop
- Tongs
- Chopsticks
- Reusable lunch containers
- Insulated food jar
- Clean-up supplies

Supply reusable lunch containers children can open and close independently, perhaps including shape variations children will recognize. A blunt spreader for cream cheese, and other soft spreads, and a spoon or tong for picking up small foods (raisins, berries) are useful lunch bag additions. An insulated food container to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold is a food safety must for hot soups and leftovers or dairy and meats. Don't forget the napkin!

## Making lunch together: a genuine "Montessori Moment!"

One of the beauties of Montessori education is the way academic ideas are integrated into daily living. Montessori teachers are trained to spot learning opportunities by observing a child, then guide the child to resources that meet the observed need.

When it comes to making lunch with your young child, the easiest way for you to do the same is to give your child words. Children love saying words like *jicama*, *edamame*, *pomegranate*, and *kiwi*, for example. Naming lunch ingredients together is a natural way to enjoy your child (and support learning, too).

Talking about the shapes of the containers reinforces what children are learning in the Sensorial area of their classrooms. Flat lids may be *circles*, *squares*, *rectangles*, or even *triangles*. Placing berries in a *cylinder*, a shape Montessori children know quite well, creates an opportunity for your child to recognize and name a shape for you!

## How to pack lunch for your children Montessori-style

When the family schedule makes the children's participation unrealistic, pack lunch with a young child's sensitive taste buds and small tummy in mind. Provide a variety of single foods rather than an adult-sized sandwich and an entire piece of fruit. The same sandwich ingredients in individual containers are more likely to be eaten. Consider portion size -- few young children can manage a whole apple in one sitting!

Small, separate portions let children combine foods in different ways. For example, a few crackers, a dab of soy butter, a few cheese slices, and a few apple slices offer children several tasty combinations from which to choose at mealtime.

Children love simple dips for their veggies and soft spreads that give their hands plenty to do. Plain yogurt or cottage cheese are nutritious dip "starters." Soy butter, egg salad, tuna salad, and cream cheese are easy spreads.

Trim bread into cracker-size pieces (quarter one slice). If you plan to make a simple sandwich the night before, it will be less soggy the next day if the filling side of the bread is "sealed" with a thin layer of butter before the filling is spread. Blotting lettuce and pickles dry with a clean towel also helps ward against a soggy sandwich the next day.

## We are what we eat -- how nutrition fits in

No discussion of lunch for children is complete without a nod to nutrition -- and how easy it is to trade food value for convenience. As parents, we strike a workable balance between baking our own bread daily and eating fast food five nights a week. Where does lunch fit in?

We worry that our hand-baked, high-protein, low-fat whole grain breakfast cookie is being traded for a pack of Oreos® or -- worse yet -- being thrown away. We wonder how it could hurt to give children those pre-packaged cheese and cracker lunches or pudding cups they've been clamoring for. Rest assured. It matters.

Healthy foods are a hallmark of Montessori philosophy. Dr. Montessori was one of the first educators to recognize the connection between nutrition and the developing brain. An excellent explanation of how Maria Montessori's observations are supported by contemporary scientific understanding of brain development, by children's nutritionist and Montessorian Jan Katzen-Luchenta, illustrates the link between nutrition and learning readiness.

The author echoes Dr. Montessori when she reminds adults that "Collectively, we must continue to take a serious interest in the child's 'inner prepared environment,' the nutritional playing field we can't see but whose impact can surely be measured through observation and investigation."

As the guardians and guides of your child's "inner prepared environment", you are in a wonderful position to apply your understanding and see for yourself how a Montessori "recipe" for lunch preparation yields a healthier lunch and a happier learner.

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