

Preventing the Lunchbox Boomerang

Tips for Creating Lunchtime Success

The scene for some parents looks like this: You lovingly create a Fortnite character from ham, nestled against a backdrop of your child's favourite crackers. The crusts are off the honey sandwich, as demanded. There is a packet of the favourite chippies and a bar that claims to contain veggies but seems to be mostly sugar. You add an apple and a carrot stick for freshness and to assuage guilt. Then you send it out into the world with a host of kisses and wait, impatiently.

Dashing to the school gates in the afternoon you spot your child and breathlessly ask what they've eaten. Deer in the headlight eyes stare back, then the head drops, the shoulders sag and you realise without looking that you have a boomerang box. Again.

Not eating lunch is a common problem and not just for children who are picky or have issues eating. Many children are too busy playing, socialising or just lose track of the eating window and suddenly lunchtime is over and the box returns to the bag largely neglected.

There are some points to consider that can improve eating for children at all stages of the eating competency spectrum. Some are simple and obvious and yet can still impact either negatively or positively on how students eat.

The more relaxed we are the more likely we are to eat. This goes for adults as well as children. If we are arguing, anxious, upset, distracted or pressured, we are not focused on eating. Anything that impacts on the comfort level will impede eating and away from home. Small worries are often magnified and this makes eating less easy again.

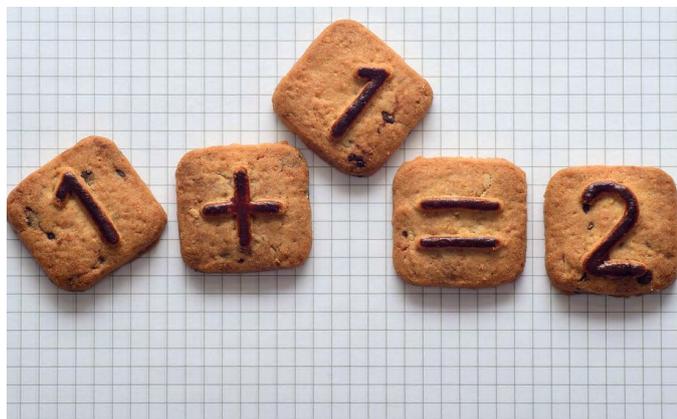
Having a limited amount of time to eat puts pressure on us to "perform." The lunchbox must be conquered quickly. For those who are naturally less comfortable about eating, this can dampen appetite. Rules that are placed around what must be eaten first or the quantity to be consumed magnifies this. Suddenly the innocuous sandwich seems to have grown and eating it seems insurmountable.

Points to think about that support confident eating:

- Away from home, more familiar foods are the more likely to get eaten. The lunchbox is not the place for learning. For anxious eaters, road testing anything new at home prior to sending it to school supports a smoother experience.
- Packing the food in easy to open and familiar containers scaffolds eating.
- Ticking boxes for our child in terms of temperature, taste and texture. Hot or cold can be a make or break as can foods that are too squishy or not crunchy or are a new flavour. Working with our child and providing food that is within their specific parameters, as best as practicable, supports better results.
- Smaller items are often less intimidating and easier to contemplate than larger offerings. Even sandwiches cut into little pieces are more manageable and help with "grab and go."
- Without morphing into Nadia Lim, presentation is important. We eat with our eyes so having something that looks good is supportive of better eating.
- Offer choices. Empowering our child, within strict parameters, enables them to feel that they have some control over their food.

If our child is very sensitive, this can be challenging in a school environment. Noise, smells, peer pressure (in a negative, not positive way) and fear of not being able to competently manage eating can make lunchtimes a miserable experience if not managed well.

"As a parent, the mission is to reduce the fear and increase the comfort and confidence around eating."





Part of ensuring our child is supported as much as is feasible is open lines of communication, so our teachers know how they can help. Often, small changes can reap large rewards. The smell of other people's lunch, for example, may be distressing. Being able to sit a little separately, at least initially may not be difficult for the teacher to manage but awareness of the issue enables everyone to act in our child's best interests.

As parents we can also support our child's eating. Ensuring that we send foods that are familiar, even if these don't fit into our vision of a perfect lunchbox. It's far more important that our child eats and gets into the habit of eating consistently than the what, at first. Once confidence builds, we can work on how to change the offerings.

It's also our responsibility to rotate options within the lunchbox. Providing the same lunch on repeat may be comforting for our child but it can produce food jags, so it is important that they

do see variety, even within their favourites. With very selective eaters this may be small changes, but those nuances build the scaffolding that will allow greater changes and variety in the future.

Similarly, greeting our child with demands for an inventory of the lunchbox can set up a "success/failure" equation. This extends to conversations with teachers' or caregivers about eating. If we can step away from pressure around the lunchbox it often enables our child to relax more and this in turn leads to better eating.

Eating away from home can be fraught with obstacles. But often, understanding and gentle encouragement along with building scaffolding around the main pain points leads to well-fuelled students bringing home an empty and appreciated lunchbox; thus ending the boomerang lunchbox. 🍴



Judith Yeabsley

Judith is passionate about ensuring all children can approach food from a place of safety and joy, not fear. She spent time cooking with children and supporting them to become confident around food. Now she works exclusively with parents providing them with the tools to get their children eating.

For more information, please visit:
www.theconfidenteater.com