

Back to Lunch – With a New Waste-Free Attitude!

If you are a parent, chances are good the end of your summer was marked by multiple trips to the store to stock up on school supplies. While you may be done buying calculators and colored pencils, you'll be shopping for lunch supplies throughout the school year.

Without a careful eye, you may be throwing away a good portion of what you buy. The majority of the waste created by U.S. households comes from the packaging on the food we purchase, and lunchtime is when most Americans, young and old, go for convenient, yet wasteful options. Nearly a third of the volume of America's trash is packaging, according to the EPA.

On average, a school-age child packing a lunch generates an estimated 67 pounds of waste per school year—practically their body weight in waste— according to www.wastefreelunches.org. This waste stresses our natural resources and the financial resources of our already-struggling schools that are charged to have the garbage hauled away. So, before you send the kids off to learn their ABCs, keep in mind the three R's: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle; as a result, you'll cut down on lunchtime waste *and* trim your back-to-school budget. Here are some helpful tips for students of all ages to pack and prepare a waste-free lunch:

Reduce: Buy foods in bulk rather than in small, individual packages. Juice, yogurt, pudding, chips, applesauce, crackers and cheese can be divided up into smaller portions and packed in sturdy, reusable Tupperware or Pyrex containers. While some packaging has valid purposes (such as to preserve freshness), most of that excess paper and plastic is designed to attract shoppers' attention or make the product appear larger. Bulk products contain less packaging and are a better value for you and the environment.

Reuse: Pack lunches in a durable, lead-free lunch box or a lunch sack made from canvas or cloth, rather than paper or plastic bags. Replace paper napkins with cloth napkins, and opt for reusable stainless-steel utensils instead of single-use plastic tableware. Non-recyclable drink pouches can be replaced with a refillable drink container. Leftover foods and beverages can be resealed in these reusable containers and saved for a later snack or taken home. To compete with enticing shiny packages, include a little color in your kid's lunchbox, such as boldly-patterned cloth napkins. Laptoplunches.com is just one place to shop for reusable lunch kits. The website also contains tips, tools and recipes to make packing a healthy and eco-friendly lunch quick and convenient.

Recycle: If your child's school has a recycling program, check the recycling guidelines and choose containers that can be recycled in that program. Don't have a recycling program at school? Ask for one or start one! In the meantime, have your child stow any recyclable containers in their backpack to be brought home. From there, they can be recycled through your curbside recycling program, or at the Eco-Cycle/Broomfield Recycling Drop-off Center.

These tips, of course, aren't just for kids. Set an example for your children with your own lunch habits. When you're packing lunch, explain how natural resources are used to make our products and packaging, and help your kids connect to the choices they make.

By changing one or two things from the above list, you and your family can make a big difference in reducing waste, and save a few bucks on your way toward a Zero Waste lifestyle.

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