



We help people...

Find answers. Solve problems. Get inspired.

Learn More

FOOD & NUTRITION

How to Make Your Child's Packed Lunch More Sustainable

By [Meena Azzollini](#) | Updated on September 10, 2021

✓ Fact checked by [Emily Swaim](#)



Filmstudio / Getty Images

Table of Contents

[How Packed Lunches Are Unsustainable](#)

Types of Unsustainable Products

How to Pack a Sustainable Lunch

Packing a lunch for your child can be a struggle, so it is natural to want to make it as convenient as possible. That is where pre-packaged items can come in. They are easy to throw together and make one of the most time-consuming to-dos much easier.

The trade-off of that convenience, however, is that those packages can be harmful to the environment and contribute to landfill waste. It may sound counterintuitive, but making sustainable choices does not have to add to the stress of packing lunch! It starts with getting the right materials in place.

Ahead are some simple changes parents can do to make packing a child's lunch more sustainable.

Related: [Creative Ideas for Packed Lunches Kids Will Actually Eat](#)

How Packed Lunches Can Be Unsustainable

Packing lunch is a good way to make sure your kids are eating a healthy and balanced meal at school. It can also quickly become an unsustainable practice. This is due to single-use packaging, as well as food waste. Here is why both of these can be environmentally harmful.

Single-Use Packaging

Both homemade meals and pre-packaged foods can contain an alarming amount of single-use packaging. Plastic bags, cling wrap, food containers, and more make frequent appearances in children's lunch boxes—as well as in landfills.

According to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, a typical school student produces 45 to 90 pounds of garbage a year from disposable lunch items.^[1] These plastic items are often not recycled, which means they contribute heavily to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.^[2]

Food Waste

Food wastage is another issue, whether your child brings a packed lunch from home or eats lunch served at school. According to a 2019 report by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), food waste in U.S. schools could amount to approximately 530,000 tons per year.^[3] This includes both food bought at school and brought from home.

This roughly translates to 1.9 million metric tons of greenhouse gases from wasted food ending up in landfills. Wasted food also means wasted water, energy, and other resources that go into food production, according to the same report.^[3]

Types of Unsustainable Products in School Lunches

There are basically three types of unsustainable products in school lunches. These are single-use plastics, composite packaging, and paper goods. All three of these products make up part of the unsustainable practices that are harmful to our environment and health.

Single-Use Plastics

From sandwich bags to snack packs, single-use plastics can show up in many places in a lunch box. Think of these as any plastic that you use once and then toss. In fact, humans produce about 300 million tons of plastic each year.^[4] These items are known to be harmful to both wildlife and human health, both in the way that they are produced and how they are disposed of.^[5]

Some products, though touted as recyclable, are not actually recycled. Items like straws or plastic utensils, for example, are unable to be recycled because they fall into the crevices of the recycling machines used. Additionally, many plastic items that can be recycled are simply not, meaning they instead end up in places like landfills or the natural environment.^[4]

Plastic production is generally unsustainable as well. Not only does it use nonrenewable resources, like natural gas, but manufacturing also produces a significant amount of harmful emissions that contribute to global warming.^[2]

This all adds up to extensive harm, for humans, wildlife, and the world around us. ^[5]

Composite Packaging

Many food products are packed in hard-to-recycle composite packaging, such as chip bags and juice pouches. These are called "metalized films" and comprise multiple layers, usually of metals and plastics. This layered composition makes it difficult to recycle, meaning they often end up in landfills or incinerated. ^[6]

Paper Goods

Depending on how the goods are made, paper products like brown paper bags, paper straws, and paper cups may not be that much friendlier to the environment. The production of paper uses lots of valuable renewable resources in its production, such as trees and water. Paper products are still a better alternative to plastics, as they are generally recyclable. However, paper can only be recycled five to seven times before its fibers break down, and recycling itself can cost a lot of energy. ^[7]

How to Pack a Sustainable School Lunch

The good news is that making sustainable swaps for your child's school lunch is inexpensive and easy. Here are some practical and clever tips that will help you be more eco-friendly and reduce lunchtime waste.

Use Reusable Storage Bags

Swap single-use plastic storage bags and for reusable, non-toxic sandwich and snack bags. You can find ones made from waxed fabric. These are often available in a variety of designs and colors that kids will love.

Another eco-friendly option to wrap lunchtime sandwiches is to use beeswax wraps instead of cling film. Beeswax wraps are made from fabric coated with beeswax, along with other ingredients, like jojoba oil and tree resin. These wraps are washable, reusable, and sustainable. You can also find them in a variety of designs and sizes. They can even be cut to any size to suit your needs.

Beeswax wraps in particular allow you to package a sandwich, crackers, or even some fruits and veggies and keep them fresher for longer. This is because they have antimicrobial properties which prevent foodborne bacteria from spoiling the food. ^[8]

Buy Reusable Lunch Containers

Investing in a reusable toxin-free [lunch container](#) made from stainless-steel or food-safe bamboo—which is also fully compostable—is an eco-friendly alternative to plastic food containers.

You can even use containers made from other non-toxic sustainable materials, such as durable hardwood, harvested wheat straw, and industrial scrap metal. These containers come in a range of styles (from bento-boxes to tiffins) and in different colors and sizes.

Get a Reusable Water Bottle

Instead of difficult-to-recycle juice cartons or pouches, or plastic water bottles, invest in a reusable [water bottle](#) for your child. They are made from materials like stainless steel, which can be rinsed and used every day. When packing lunch, you can fill the bottle with water or juice. And your child can refill the bottle as needed from water fountains at school.

Buy in Bulk

Buy products like crackers, cheese, cookies, dried fruits, juice, or yogurt in bulk rather than in individual containers. Not only is this a budget-friendly option, but it also reduces packaging waste from individually wrapped items.

Then, pack the food in a bento-style lunch box, sustainable container, or reusable storage bag so that your child can eat how much they want and easily bring home whatever is unfinished.

Pack Seasonal Fruits and Veggies

Shopping seasonally means making the most of the produce that is grown during certain points in the year. Not only is this more cost-effective, but it also reduces greenhouse gas emissions and uses less energy for artificial heating, lighting, and storage, which are associated with producing food out of its natural growing season. ^[9]

Studies also suggest that replacing red meat and dairy with chicken, fish, eggs, or a vegetable-based diet one day a week can be more effective at reducing greenhouse gas emissions than buying locally sourced food. ^[10]
^[11] Trying to pack a meatless meal once a week is a good place to start.

Compost Leftovers

Encourage your kids to bring leftovers (and any brown paper bags) home and add them to the compost pile. According to the EPA, food scraps and yard waste together make up over 30% of what we throw away and can be composted instead. ^[12]

There are many benefits to composting: It enriches soil, which helps plants grow, keeps plant disease and pests away, and reduces methane emissions from landfills.

Other Quick and Sustainable Swaps

- Swap disposable cutlery for reusable stainless steel or bamboo ones.
- Swap throwaway straws for reusable ones made from glass, stainless steel, bamboo, or silicone.
- Swap paper napkins for reusable cloth napkins.

Read Next: [How to Pack a Bento Box Lunch for Kids](#)

12 Sources 



By [Meena Azzollini](#)

Meena Azzollini is a health and wellness content creator with experience covering parenting, women's health, and mental health. She specializes in creating effective content for various health and wellness-based businesses and empowers them with words that make a connection with their audience.

 [See Our Editorial Process](#)

 [Meet Our Review Board](#)

 [Share Feedback](#)

Related Articles

 [Close up portrait of sweet toddler kid eating fruit puree from plastic doypack, sitting in stroller, outdoor snack time](#)

CHALLENGES

How to Reduce Your Kid's Single-Use Items

Fact checked by Marley Hall

 [recycling family](#)

CHALLENGES

How Your Family Can Be More Eco-Conscious in 2022

Fact checked by Zerah Isaacs

 [Three types of baby detergents in a basket on a tile floor](#)

WHAT TO BUY

The 14 Best Baby Detergents of 2024 That Are Gentle on Your Little One's Skin

By Laura Lu, MS

 [Best Baby Gifts](#)

BABY GEAR

The Best Baby Gifts That Parents Really Want to Receive

Medically reviewed by Tyra Tennyson Francis, MD

 [Plus Size Maternity Clothes](#)

 [Best Gifts to Buy Expecting Moms of 2024](#)

PREGNANCY PRODUCTS

The Best Places to Buy Plus-Size Maternity Clothes, According to Fashion Experts

By Laura Lu, MS

PRODUCTS & GEAR

The 60 Best Gifts for Expecting Moms Who Deserve the Best

By Maya Polton, Katrina Cossey, and Phoebe Sklansky

 a woman carrying a baby while shopping

DIAPERS & POTTY TRAINING PRODUCTS

The 13 Best Diapers of 2024

By Katrina Cossey and Deanna McCormack

 School lunch

FOOD & NUTRITION

Is School or Packed Lunch Right for Your Family?

Medically reviewed by Willow Jarosh, MS, RD

 Overhead view of hands making a packed lunch

FOOD & NUTRITION

Creative Ideas for Packed

 Best Gifts for Grandparents

PARENTING ADVICE

The 30 Best Gifts for

Lunches Kids Will Actually Eat

Medically reviewed by Willow Jarosh, MS, RD

Grandparents to Celebrate Any Occasion

Medically reviewed by Dr. Ann-Louise T Lockhart, PsyD, ABPP

 **Battat Toy Shopping Cart with Basket and Little Tikes Shopping Cart displayed on a two-tone green patterned background**

TOYS & GIFTS

The 12 Best Toy Shopping Carts for Endless Pretend Play

By Tanya Edwards

 **Collage of sippy cups we recommend on a purple background**

NURSING & FEEDING PRODUCTS

The 7 Best Sippy Cups of 2024

By Cheryl Lock and Katrina Cossey

 **Smiling children eating lunch in classroom**

FOOD & NUTRITION

Kids' Lunch Boxes and Food Safety

Fact checked by Andrea Rice

 **Best backpacks collaged against a patterned pink background**

WHAT TO BUY

The 14 Best Backpacks for High School and College Students, Tested by Teens

By Laura Lu, MS

 **Kids and counselor play at camp**

RAISING KIDS

 **A pile of children's clothing.**

RAISING KIDS

Summer Day Camp Packing List for Kids

Fact checked by Cara Lustik

Everything You Need to Know About Buying Secondhand Baby Items

Fact checked by Daniella Amato

verywell family

Daily Parenting Advice to Your Inbox

SIGN UP

Follow Us



Getting Pregnant

[Pregnancy](#)

[Ages and Stages](#)

[Parenting](#)

[Kids' Health](#)

[Meet Our Review Board](#)

[Editorial Process](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Careers](#)

[About Us](#)

[Diversity Pledge](#)

[In the News](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Contact](#)

Verywell Family's content is for informational and educational purposes only. Our website is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

© 2024 Dotdash Media, Inc. — All rights reserved



Verywell Family is part of the [Dotdash Meredith](#) publishing family.