

## Bonus: Packing School Lunches

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is a bonus episode: packing school lunches!

I did not anticipate recording this episode, but after this week's Office Hours episode where I answered your questions, I realized that this particular question needed a mini episode all its own. It was the most frequently asked question in the Instagram post, and that makes sense. It's early-mid August, and school is about to start. School lunches are a whole thing.

Like I said, there were a lot of comments, but I chose this one from @christinmbland as our example today.

"Packing school lunch! Finding something that will be balanced-ish in terms of food groups, cost effective, and flexible enough to meet the ever shifting goal posts of a 2nd grader's preferences while also not consuming a lot of my bandwidth."

Alright, I have a few thoughts here. This isn't a system, just a series of considerations for you, depending on your particular lunchbox stresses. But before we get into those, I want to quickly comment on school lunches provided by the actual school.

Cafeteria lunches get a bad rap. I think there's an implicit bias against our kids eating school lunches, and I don't want this episode to perpetuate that bias. Some schools don't provide lunch. Some kids, like mine, prefer homemade lunches, and I have made the choice to say yes. There's nothing wrong with making your kids' lunches. But I do think it's vital to acknowledge that cafeteria lunches aren't bad or need to be off the table. For a lot of kids, even kids at my own kids' elementary school since it's a Title 1 school, the cafeteria breakfasts and lunches are the only meals those kids get. Some parents don't have the funds to make lunch for the kids every day, so the free lunch provided by the school is a lifesaver. Some parents don't have the time or energy to make lunches for their kids. Essentially, cafeteria school lunches are a wonderful resource. Homemade lunchbox lunches are not morally or fundamentally better than cafeteria lunches. Yes, this episode is aimed at packing school lunches because that's the challenge we're working with here, but I wanted to clearly state this up front. Cafeteria lunches are just as good for kids, from a nourishment standpoint and a social standpoint, as homemade lunches.

Okay, on to thoughts about packing lunches!

, you have to name what matters most. Not what matters, what matters *most*. Christin named a few things that do matter: balance, budget, versatility for a picky eater, and personal bandwidth. Those are all four important things, and I see how they would all matter. If you're like Christin with several things, pick just one. It doesn't mean you don't pay attention to the others. You absolutely will and should. But take the time to choose the thing that matters *most* so that when it comes time to

make a hard decision where only one thing can matter, you know what does. Otherwise you'll feel overwhelmed, annoyed, and stuck.

Second thought.

Your kids might not care about variety or repetition like you think they do. Listen, Annie eats salami and cheese literally every single day for lunch. This is not hyperbole. Every. Single. Day. Occasionally she'll ask for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but when I say occasionally, I mean maybe three or four times a year. I did the math recently to see if I could nail down how many pieces of the one particular brand of Aldi salami she's eaten in her life, and the number was somewhere close to 4000. She just went to the doctor, and all of her vitals are great. She's a healthy girl. She just eats salami every day.

Was there a time where I felt lazy because I just kept giving her the same thing? Sure. Does she actually prefer to eat the same protein every day? She does. Fantastic. I'm not going to spend my time on creativity and variety and finding new lunch ideas when she doesn't really want those things. Now, this is important. Why does that work for me? Because variety doesn't matter. A wide variety of lunch rotations is not top priority of mine and definitely not the *most* important thing. If it matters to you, approaching lunches this way won't work, right? Both of us would be terrific parents taking care of our kids, but different priorities lead to different choices. Don't try and make choices or shame yourself for choices you're not making when your priority doesn't match it.

Back to what the kid thinks. I'm inviting you to not make assumptions about what your kids want, especially if those assumptions are making lunches harder for you. If they don't care and you don't care either, stick with the same thing that works.

**We'll be right back...**

Now I want to give you a lunch packing system we've been using for over a decade. This system uses a combination of three of my favorite Lazy Genius principles: Decide Once, Put Everything In Its Place, and Batch It.

Now, this system might not be an exact fit for you. In fact, it probably won't be. I'm not sharing so you'll copy my system. I'm sharing so you can see how the principles work for us based on what matters.

Here's what we do. My kids use PlanetBox lunchboxes. PlanetBox usually has a sale on Black Friday and also on Earth Day, so keep an eye out if you're in the market. But honestly, you can use whatever you like. PlanetBox lunchboxes are stainless steel Bento boxes, and I love them for a number of reasons. They last forever, they're easy to put in the dishwasher where you open it and put it in the dishwasher like you would a long cutting board, they were easy for my kids to open and eat out of when they were little because there wasn't any packaging or lids or anything, and - the most important reason for this question - they help me and the kids put everything in its place.

The type of PlanetBoxes we have has five compartments. There's a big area that's usually for the main protein. A sandwich, pepperoni, salami and cheese, what have you. Then there are three medium-sized compartments. We use two for fruit and one for a crunchy thing. Pretzels, crackers, stuff like that. Then there's a tiny little compartment in the middle of the lunchbox, and my kids literally call whatever goes in there "the middle thing." The middle thing is usually M&Ms or a couple of sour patch kids or those chocolate covered marshmallows from Trader Joe's that fit perfectly. It's like a little dessert cubby. Even when we have lunch at home on regular plates, the kids will still ask if they can get "a middle thing." It's hilarious.

But we have decided once not just what goes in everybody's lunches but even the compartments those things go in. Everybody gets a protein, two fruits, a crunchy thing, and a middle thing. And if one of the fruits is a cut up orange that needs the big container which only happens for Sam because he's the only kid that likes oranges, I'll adjust the protein to pepperoni slices and put those into one of the medium-sized sections. They fit great. The idea though is that we have decided once what goes in the lunch, and everything has a place.

Now, let's bring in Batch It. When you're dealing with all the possibilities of something, I find it helpful to brainstorm all those possibilities at once. Batch the decision making. So since I have three kids with three different sets of preferences, there was a season where I literally wrote down what they liked on a piece of paper so I wouldn't have to think. Now, I've made so many lunches that the list is in my brain, but the list was super helpful to me.

Recently I had to write the list down for my mom when she stayed with the kids for over a week during the school year while Kaz and I went on a twenty year anniversary cruise, and it was hilarious how many differences there were among my kids. But my mom said the list was enormously helpful because she knew what options she had for what compartments in their lunchboxes. I think this really does help.

Side note: some of y'all already know this, but Kaz and I have a very even division of labor in our house. I feel very lucky to have a husband who doesn't see me as the only person capable of doing traditionally female tasks around the house. That said, everything related to food except the cleaning up is my purview. He will cook when I need him to, but everything food and cooking is in my chart of chores, not his. That's why I usually make lunches.

Okay, back to Batch It. Again, this list is in my head, but I know what each kid's individual lists are for all the categories of main, fruits, crunchies, and middle things. Sometimes the kids help me make lunch or I take care of a couple of cubbies and then say, "get your crunchy thing and middle thing!" and leave them to it. But we all know what goes where, and we all know what they like.

Now let's talk about fruits for a second. I used to put carrot sticks and cucumbers and bell pepper strips in their lunches, and they always came back. Always. For years. So I stopped. We introduce vegetables at dinner, not during lunch, at least right now. That's the choice I've made.

I also don't make food look cute. That's another choice that's often applied to produce. I also don't make it more interesting with yogurt dips or fruit salad dressings and stuff like that. They just get washed and sometimes cut fruit, pretty close to how it come off the tree or out of the ground. Again, that's another choice that works for us but doesn't have to work for you.

I won't bore you with crackers each kid likes, so we'll stop on the particulars. The point of Batching is to have a series of decisions made at once. These are our categories, they go in these containers, and each kid has a list that lives in my head of what goes in it. It's not too bad.

I'll also point out that because of the simplicity of what the kids eat, there's not a lot of "making" lunches. It's really just taking something from a box or clamshell and putting it straight into the lunchbox. I used to follow a couple lunch-making moms on Instagram and loved all of their unique Bento gatherings. Then I started feeling crappy about myself because I never did that, so I stopped following them. I'm glad that people make those kinds of lunches and that kids enjoy them, and I think it's lovely. It's just not for me. I mean, it'd be cool for me, but I value a lot more things than I value creative, fun lunches. I use different creative outlets for myself. So if you want to keep things super simple, do it. There's nothing wrong with it.

This might be a wild thing to say, but I don't mind making lunches. Because I've named what matters, supported it with my choices and with ease from Lazy Genius principles, and I've let the other pressures go, it's not so bad. It might not have to be for you either.

Now one final thing that's important to bring into the school lunch conversation is the presence of a morning routine. One of the reasons making lunches isn't super stressful is because we have a pretty stable morning routine that includes those lunches. We've slowly been building this routine for years, and even though it sometimes has to shift a little bit, like this year when Ben goes to middle school a little later than he went to elementary, our morning routine is pretty much the same. And making lunches has always been part of it. I'm not saying that you need a new morning routine or whatever. Just remember that if your morning feels a little chaotic for whatever reason, of course it's going to be hard to make lunch. That's why some people like to make at least part of the kids' lunches at night, to help stave off some of that chaos in the morning.

Hear this permission. If mornings are already a little crazy, don't beat yourself up for not being able to add an entire meal to the morning! It's hard to make lunches every single day. It really is, especially if mornings are unpredictable in your house for whatever reason. You might have a cranky kid who never wakes up. You might have ADHD, and your executive function skills are harder to access in the morning. You might be trying to fit an old routine into a new season of life and can't figure out how to make it work.

Just be kind and patient as you do this. Yes, we have calm-ish mornings, but my kids also only eat maybe twelve foods. You won't see star cucumbers or sandwich rolls in their boxes ever. That's not what matters. Calm and simplicity does though, so that's what I've focused on for ten years now which is why it's a little easier at our house. It's not that I have it figured out across the board. I've

simply named what matters, made my problems smaller, and applied a Lazy Genius principle or two to find what works. And you can, too.

And that's our bonus episode on packing school lunches. I hope it helped, and thanks for listening.

Until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you on Monday!