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## WIN

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WEDDING VOUCHERS

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MARK SHEPPARD  
CLOWNS ABOUT

JOCELYN HANCOCK  
JUST PEACHY

## yum's the word

Solving the lunchbox dilemma with  
healthy food kids *will* want to eat





## Lunch box lessons

What children want to eat and what they should be eating can be poles apart. Lucy Brook gets the low-down on winning school lunches

**OUT OF THE BOX ...** In a Picke's Esther Downie produces tasty lunchtime treats enjoyed by children, including daughter Alice, 10, opposite. Photographs Justine Walpole



As the end of the school holidays approaches, parents face the perennial problem of making healthy and appealing lunches that won't be tossed in the bin in favour of tuckshop treats.

Following the Queensland Government's overhaul of tuckshops and the introduction of the Traffic Light System, or colour-coded foods to help children choose healthy, balanced meals, lunchtime options have improved dramatically. Many schools have ditched soft drinks, lollies and fatty foods. Good intentions aside, childhood obesity is rife, with more than one in five Queensland children overweight or obese.

Brisbane News canvassed the experts for ideas and tips to ensure children are healthy and more active in 2010.

### THE TEACHERS

The familiar sight of teenagers slurping high-sugar energy drinks and gobbling hot chips before they're even on school turf is frustrating for physical education teacher Greg Thomas, of Coorparoo Secondary College.

"Many kids in Brisbane use rail or bus to get to school and before they're even through the gates, they've blown their lunch money on junk," says Greg, a father of two.

"Packing healthy lunches and occasionally giving lunch money as a treat would be ideal. We need to educate kids on the value of healthy living."

"Once they hit high school, they're much more image-conscious, especially girls, and getting them to participate in sports becomes increasingly difficult."

Robyn Barnes, a former teacher at Mansfield Primary School, says younger children are generally more active than high school-aged kids, but they're also more likely to swap food – a playground habit that irks hardworking parents who've made nutritionally balanced lunches.

"Making lunches attractive is very important, as is getting kids involved in the process, so they're proud of their lunch," says Robyn, now a university lecturer.

"Colourfully packaged food is what gets swapped among kids, so this is the stuff to limit. With food allergies so prevalent, the more kids understand that their lunch has been made just for them, the better."

Brian Pascoe, a sports teacher at Villanova College, a private boys' school for grades five to 12, says many teenagers are engaged in casual work and have their own money to spend on food. He adds that while one third of students are extremely active, another third does a small amount of exercise and the rest of them do nothing.

"At Villanova every student undertakes a test to gauge their fitness," says Brian, who recommends team sports for those not keen on swimming or athletics.

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"According to their score, they're offered a Villa fitness program. It isn't compulsory, but it's a good way to gauge their fitness level."

## THE DIETITIANS

The most common lunchbox mistake busy parents make is "choosing the easy food", according to accredited dietitian Nicola Fox.

She says the best way to encourage children to eat well and enjoy it is to educate them about food.

"Children who have a good understanding about healthy eating and have access to healthy foods are more likely to make the best choices. It's not age specific, and it's possible to make nutrition fun for young minds."

Dietitian Louise Cooney, who consults at the Princess Alexandra Hospital, says parents who eat well will influence their children, and vice versa.

"Kids mimic their parents, so it shouldn't be one rule for kids and another for parents," says Louise, who encourages the use of fresh, wholefoods and a wide variety of tastes and textures to keep children interested.

She says children are almost guaranteed to food swap, especially in primary school, but if it's fussy eaters you're struggling with, she recommends trying the same foods in different formats.

"Parents shouldn't disregard a food altogether – if, for example, your child doesn't like lettuce in a salad, try it chopped up in a sandwich."

Adolescents are harder to convince to eat well, adds Louise.

"We're fighting a losing battle getting teenagers to take a packed lunch, and I suspect it would be a rare teenager who actually ate that food and didn't buy something else," she says.

"The trick is to continue to lobby for healthy foods in tuckshops. That way, even if they have their own income and buy food on the way to and from school, when they're there, they have healthy options."

Louise's ideal packed lunch is "a freezer brick to keep food fresh, yoghurt, some fresh fruit and a bread roll with chicken or ham and plenty of salad".

## THE COOKS

Are you fresh out of ideas for healthy lunches? Rachael Bermingham and Kim McCosker, the duo behind the phenomenally successful *Four Ingredients* cookbooks and television series, say variety is the key.

"Healthy school lunches don't have to be boring," says Rachael, mum to son Jaxson, 4, and stepmother to Lee, 20, and Teri, 19.

"We'd get bored eating the same thing everyday, and so do kids. So mix it up – try rotating salad, sandwiches, wraps, crackers, corn thins, focaccia bread, fruit loaves and pitta bread."

Kim, a mum of three boys – Morgan, 7, Hamilton, 4, and Flynn, 1 – says homemade is always best.

"Use ingredients you can combine yourself, rather than buying pre-made food," she says. "Try sandwich fillings like cheese, grated carrot, lettuce and sultanas, or bacon, lettuce and tomato. If you're struggling to get the kids to eat vegies, try cutting them into sticks and also packing a little container of dip."

Esther Downie, owner of Camp Hill cafe and catering company In a Pickle ([www.inapickle.com.au](http://www.inapickle.com.au)), which sells children's lunch boxes and runs popular cooking classes for children, says school lunches are a lot easier if you're organised, otherwise "they're an absolute nightmare".

"Plan and get creative with leftovers – make a salad that can go on a wrap the next day," says Esther, mum to Alice, 10, Harriet, 5, Max, 3, and Imogen, five months.

"One recipe I love is bite-sized sandwiches. Roll out a large slice of bread with a rolling pin, line it with cream cheese, ham or salmon, and thinly sliced cucumber, and then roll it up like sushi. It's easy and different."

Esther, who will release the 2010 cooking class schedule for children at the end of this month, also packs her children frozen tubs of Greek yoghurt, toasted muesli, fresh fruit and homemade muffins.

"A muffin should have five or six ingredients, not 30," she says. "The main thing is to plan ahead. If you're organised, you'll eat well and so will your kids."

## THE NATUROPATH

Brisbane-born naturopath and nutritionist Janella Purcell, recently appointed food expert on the upcoming series of Channel Ten's *The Biggest Loser*, says growing bodies need sufficient protein for muscle development, iron for energy and strength and calcium to support healthy bones.

"I would urge parents to get the essential vitamins into their kids through food, not through supplements," says Janella, who began her television career in 2003 when she became the *Today* show's food editor.

"Multivitamins for kids are unnecessary. If a specific vitamin is required, like zinc for example, a special zinc supplement should be prescribed but all sorts of vitamins mixed together in one pill? No way."

Janella says protein doesn't need to come from meat all the time, as legumes, fish, eggs and soy products provide ample amounts. Children need more iron than adults do, but instead of constant servings of red meat, Janella recommends almonds, grains and fish.

"Calcium is a tricky one," says Janella, who has written two books, *Elixir*, and the forthcoming *Eating for the Seasons*.

"Parents tend to give their kids milk all the time, but it can cause other problems like asthma and allergies. Chickpeas are amazing for calcium, and yoghurt is better than milk because it's digested more easily. Sesame seeds, tahini, almonds and green vegetables will also boost calcium levels. My advice for parents is to go easy on the milk."



## TOP LUNCH BOX TIPS

- Make muffin-sized frittatas using leftover or canned vegetables such as corn, beans, peas and onion. "I mix vegies with a bit of garlic, goat's feta, eggs and squashed cannellini beans and bake them in muffin trays," says naturopath Janella Purcell. "They're easy and you can freeze them."
- Fill Mountain Bread wraps, free of preservatives and other harmful additives, with chicken or fish and plenty of salad.
- Make tempeh fingers. "I know it's a bit out there but because it's a fermented soy product, it's so good for kids and easy to digest," says Janella. Rich in vitamin B12 and protein, the soy beans help stabilise blood sugar and grilled in soy sauce they're "salty and delicious".
- Use less tuna and more sardines and tinned salmon. "Tuna is endangered – we're down to about 10 per cent of what we used to have and, as a result, it's loaded with heavy metals," Janella says. "Sardines are out of this world for calcium and salmon is great for omega 3 and 6."
- "Almonds provide iron and calcium, which growing bodies really need. Pack them if your school policy permits nuts," Janella says.
- "Zucchini slice has to be one of the easiest lunchbox meals for kids," says In a Pickle's Esther Downie. "It's packed with nutrients, it's tasty and it's a good way to break up the week if your kids eat a lot of meat."
- "Make an extra serve of salad the night before and use it as a sandwich filling," suggests Esther. "Not only will it be healthy but it's a great way to teach kids about being less wasteful."
- Be creative with sandwich fillings. Use grated vegetables, flavoured tofu, caesar salad, chutneys, vegetable patties and different types of meat.



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