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## Fuel for the brain

As the lazy days of summer come to an end and the school year looms before us, many parents find themselves doing some math: five school days a week multiplied by 10 months in the academic year equals many, many lunches.

*By Stacey Stein*

Coming up with creative ways to fill our children's lunchboxes is daunting, which is why the lure of quick and easy meal options may be hard to resist. But there's a good reason why parents shouldn't cave in to the temptations of packaged snacks and processed deli meats. Nourishing our kids with healthy, nutrient-dense foods may have a positive impact on their brain function, potentially improving their ability to learn and their performance in school.

So before you start mapping out lunches for the upcoming school year, read on to learn about some foods that can help give your kids' brainpower a boost.

### Beef

Iron is essential for optimal brain function – this important mineral carries oxygen to the brain, as well as throughout the body. Iron deficiency has been linked to learning problems in children, as well as a lack of concentration.

Beef contains high levels of iron and is packed with B vitamins, which registered dietitian Shannon Crocker says "help your body and brain use energy."

There are many ways you can include beef in your child's lunchbox. Crocker recommends using leftovers from dinner, which can be a lifesaver for time-crunched parents. "During the busy week it's important for parents to think about how their dinners can do double duty as lunch," she says.

Try serving [cottage cheese meatball marinara](#) for dinner, then pack up the leftovers for lunch, pairing this with some whole grain pasta or brown rice. Other options include a [meat lasagna](#) or a [beef and cheddar wrap](#).

### Lentils

Looking for a vegetarian iron source? Try lentils – they're not only full of iron, but are also chock full of protein. However, because lentils are a plant source of iron, Crocker cautions this form is not as well absorbed as iron from beef. A vitamin C-rich food in your child's lunchbox will help counteract that.

Try making lentils into a hummus-type dip and spread it on a sandwich, or pair with veggies (including red pepper strips, a great source of vitamin C). You can also make a lentil salad that includes tomatoes. Cooked lentils mixed with rice, quinoa or whole grain pasta is another iron-rich lunch idea and including strawberries in your child's lunchbox will give them the vitamin C boost they need.

Kids who don't like eating lentils in a salad may enjoy [lentil soup](#), which can be easily packed in an insulated container and makes a delicious warming dish in the fall and winter.

### Whole grains

Low-glycemic, high-fibre grains such as barley and quinoa are a great source of carbohydrates, which Crocker describes as "the main fuel for the brain." Kids need carbohydrates to ensure their brains function properly. With whole grains like barley, carbohydrates are released slowly, resulting in a more balanced blood sugar level. This will help keep kids' energy and mood levels on a more even keel throughout the day.

Grains like barley or quinoa can easily be incorporated into salads (like this [quinoa salad with grilled veggies](#)) or can be substituted for rice. Other carbohydrate-rich whole grains include oats and popcorn, which can be included as a snack on its own or as part of a trail mix.

### Cheese and cottage cheese

Protein-rich foods like cheese and cottage cheese help kids maintain their energy levels by keeping them satisfied longer. "That way they're not hungry and can concentrate on learning, instead of when they have their next snack break," says Crocker.

Single serve cottage cheese makes a great school snack, or you can create a parfait by mixing cottage cheese with berries and drizzling some maple syrup. Cheese and crackers is a quick and simple, yet protein dense snack. Or you can get creative and make cheese and grape kabobs for a fun snack.

### Berries

Naturally sweet and popular with most children, berries may also benefit kids' brains. Berries contain antioxidants called flavonoids, which according to Crocker "might help protect the brain and improve blood flow." She adds that research (though preliminary in humans) suggests flavonoids might also help boost memory.

Berries are also high in fibre and low in calories, so kids can load up on them without feeling weighed down. The fibre and water in them also help keep kids feeling full for longer.

Berries make a great snack as is, or you can pair them with a cottage cheese dip so that your kids also get a hit of protein – simply blend the cottage cheese and add a shot of flavour with some brown sugar and vanilla or honey and lemon zest.

### Water

It's one of the simplest yet also one of the most important steps when assembling your child's lunchbox: make sure to pack a large, reusable water bottle that kids can refill at school.

"If you're not hydrated, you can't concentrate and you feel tired," says Crocker.

Children who aren't properly hydrated may have trouble staying alert, negatively impacting their ability to learn.

### Start the day right

Breakfast is often referred to as the most important meal of the day, and with good reason. According to Crocker, studies show that eating breakfast may help improve kids' memory and academic performance.

"Hungry kids are tired, and they'll perform poorly on tests because they can't pay attention," Crocker says.

Because most parents are starved for time in the morning, she recommends preparing breakfast in advance. You can try making an [overnight muesli](#), or [French toast](#) or [pancakes](#) which can be warmed up in the morning.

Smoothies make a great breakfast – they're not only quick and easy to prepare, but are an excellent way to load up your kids with a variety of fruits and veggies. You can also blend in some cottage cheese, which will give your kids the protein they need to help prime them for a day of learning. This [apple and kale smoothie](#) and [mango smoothie](#) both taste great and incorporate protein-rich cottage cheese.