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By [MoniqueB](#) 08-31-2009 [Green Life](#)

Pack these eco-friendly ideas in your child's lunch bag

By Monique Beaudin, The Gazette

Thousands of kids on the island of Montreal are back at school today, carrying lunch boxes full of plastic and metal containers and foil wrappers that often end up in the trash.

A movement is afoot to put lunch boxes on a zero-waste diet. According to [Waste Reduction Week Canada](#), the average Canadian student produces 27 kilograms of garbage over a year from their school lunches alone.



(Julia Mackiewicz packs an eco-friendly lunch for her son Liam. Gazette photo: Peter McCabe)

So many schools in the Commission scolaire de Montréal were asking for information about packing "litterless lunches" that the school board created a pamphlet full of tips and advice about how to do it and distributed it to all its schools.

"Our job is to help children succeed in school, but we are also aware that we have to help them become eco-friendly citizens," said the board's environment counsellor, Carole Marcoux.

The amount of garbage Montrealers generate continues to grow. The provincial government this summer okayed the expansion of two landfills north of the city in order to continue receiving our waste.

Schools across the island have been trying to do their part to tackle the garbage problem, holding "Litterless Lunch" days, which encourage students to reduce their waste by using reusable containers, avoiding pre-packaged snacks and choosing cloth napkins.

"The ideal eco-friendly lunch box is one that produces no waste at all," Marcoux said.

At my children's school, lunch monitors or students go around the gym at lunch time, checking to see who has zero-waste lunches. Once a month, they hold a draw, choosing names from all the litterless lunch kids, and they give out prizes.

For kids who get a hot lunch at school, there are challenges to reducing waste, CSDM dietitian Marie-Pierre Drolet said. The school board encourages caterers and non-profit organizations that run hot-lunch program to choose recyclable or compostable containers, but it isn't always easy, she said.

"You can't really put soup in a cardboard bowl," Drolet said.

The growing awareness of the waste generated by school lunches have led to brisk sales at Julia Mackiewicz's online store [Go Green In Stages](#). For the past year, the West Island woman has been selling a waste-free lunch kit made up of a reusable, washable lunch bag, stainless steel food containers, Thermoses and stainless steel water bottles. Using reusable containers will keep things like juice boxes, individual snack wrappers and even lunch bags out of the trash, she said.

"People are more aware of environmental issues in general, and something has made them realize that this is an area that they can do something about," Mackiewicz said. "The juice boxes, the individual wrappers and the paper napkins they may use add up over the course of a year."

Mackiewicz has a video guide to making waste-free lunches on her website (<http://tinyurl.com/lcsay3>), where you can watch a typical lunch get an eco-friendly makeover.

Here are some ideas from the CSDM, the Montreal environmental group [Équiterre](#) and [Récyc-Québec](#) for packing an eco-friendly lunch.

- First, pack it in a reusable container like a lunch box or an insulated bag. You can also get lunch boxes with smaller containers inside, like a Japanese bento box. We have two made by the California company [Laptop Lunches](#), which our kids have used off and on during the past three years. If your child is into pre-made Lunchables, you can make your own healthier version and pack them into the lunch box's small containers.
- Get reusable containers. You can pack everything from juice to leftover spaghetti to fruit salad or muffins in reusable containers. Not only will that cut down on garbage like plastic wrap and plastic sandwich bags, it will save you money because you can keep reusing the containers. Reusable water bottles (both plastic and metal), Thermoses for hot food and plastic containers are available in all shapes and sizes.
- Ditch the plastic cutlery and paper napkins. Yes, you can send your child to school with a real napkin and a fork. We've been doing it for four years and have lost only a couple of forks. Plastic cutlery can't be recycled in Montreal, and while paper napkins could be composted, very few schools have any kind of composting program in place. You can make your own napkins out of old sheets, or pick up low-cost ones at dollar or discount stores. If your child needs several pieces of cutlery, consider buying the all-in-one style available in the camping section of hardware or department stores.
- Next, think about what you're putting in the lunch box or bag. To avoid having the surplus wind up in a garbage can, don't pack too much food. Using leftovers will give the kids a break from the same-old, same-old sandwiches, and prevent you from having to throw out spoiled food in a few days. While single servings of foods like cheese, crackers and granola bars are convenient, their wrappings go straight into the trash. You can buy yogurt, cheese and crackers in bulk, and package them yourself in small reusable containers. Water, juice and other beverages can be packed into reusable drink containers or bottles.
- If you have a compost bin or a municipal compost collection, get the kids to bring their food scraps home.

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