

'So much mental load': Mothers speak about school lunches

September 7 2024, by Jennifer Black



Mothers described the complex physical, mental and emotional work needed to provide a 'good' school lunch. Credit: August de Richelieu/Pexels

Parents of school-aged children have plenty on their plates as they transition back to school routines. For most Canadian families, beyond

concerns about school supplies or new experiences, it also means another year of packing lunches—an essential daily task that can feel overwhelming.

Children need reliable access to healthy [food at school](#) to fuel learning, growth and [nutrition needs](#). Despite the widely recognized importance of feeding [children](#) well on school days, many—including [mothers we interviewed](#) for a research study—underestimate the complexity, time, effort and significance of this seemingly mundane [daily work](#).

[In Canada](#), where fewer than 10% of kids regularly eat school-provided meals, parents, [especially mothers](#), are left to juggle [school lunches](#), often under major pressure.

Social factors affecting health

My work with [The Public Health and Urban Nutrition](#) research group at University of British Columbia is concerned with understanding the complex social and contextual factors that shape the health of individuals, communities and the environment.

Our team works with community partners, including [public health staff and school districts](#), to understand and improve school food programs.

In a recent study I collaborated on with the [late sociologist Sinikka Elliott](#), master's student [Seri Niimi-Burch interviewed 14 mothers](#) from a suburban British Columbia school district where a new lunch program was available for purchase, although most students still brought a packed lunch.

Ten participants were employed outside the home full- or [part-time](#). Two were looking for work and four reported raising children or keeping house full-time. Twelve participants self-identified as white, one self-

identified as Middle Eastern and another as Punjabi. Most described themselves as middle-class, while three self-identified as poor, low-income or working class.

Complex work to provide good lunch

These mothers taught us about the complex physical, mental and emotional work needed to provide a "good" school lunch. This included trying to live up to high expectations related to sending healthy and balanced meals that were also tasty and enjoyed by children.

These mothers spoke about the heavy responsibility for ensuring children are well-fed at school. One mother, aware her parenting may be judged based on her lunch-packing quality, told her son's teachers, "don't judge us for the foods we send to school."

Another mom, a teacher herself, reflected on how she judged other parents, saying, "I think like oh, if I glanced as a teacher and looked in at this lunch kit, would I be thinking like oh, that looks like a healthy lunch or would I be thinking oh my God, what the heck is in there?"

The study revealed that mothers often felt scrutinized not only by teachers and other parents, but also by their own children.

Emotional weight of meeting needs

On one hand, mothers described enormous care and effort required to make lunches. Yet mothers also commonly downplayed their lunch-packing efforts, not wanting to look like they'd gone overboard, cared too much or were overly controlling.

While mothers developed routines to reduce the mental load of lunch

planning, and described some tasks as repetitive and mundane, many detailed the complex planning and math involved in budgeting and buying the right amount and types of food, and the emotional weight of meeting their children's needs and preferences.

Mothers' responses reflected [societal pressures](#) about how women are expected to live up to ideals about good mothering, which often matched up with longstanding gender norms about [middle-class mothering](#), including wanting their kids to "eat right" and being responsible for protecting children from future health risks and obesity.

Meaning in daily acts

Despite the strain, mothers also expressed pride and meaning cultivated through these daily caring acts. One mother said, "being able to know that he's going to have something hot in his system at lunch time to keep him warm makes me feel good as a parent."

Another shared: "I know if I'm feeding her good things in the day, it makes me feel good." Others said packing lunch made them feel connected to their children.

Even when the same parents described how school lunch work is exhausting and stressful, they recognized food work as an important place for connecting with children [and expressing their love and care](#).

The emotional, physical and cognitive work described in this research deserves more recognition. Food work, including lunch packing, is often ignored in health and [nutrition research](#).

It's time to actively recognize the value of school lunch work, and better support those who do it—whether it's parents, other family members, caregivers or school lunch workers.

Directions for new school food approaches

In light of Canada's new [national school food policy](#), these findings could have implications as provinces seek to develop school food programs. The policy builds on a \$1 billion commitment to create a new National School Food Program.

For parents who are already stretched thin, school-provided meals can reduce the time, money and mental load draining many Canadian families.

Canada ranks poorly compared to other wealthy countries in investments supporting children's food and nutrition needs. In 2022, [one in four children](#) lived in a household experiencing food insecurity.

Our previous research found that more than one in 20 Canadian students reported [eating no lunch at school](#) on a nationwide survey, and students were twice as likely to miss school lunch altogether if they experienced food insecurity.

Much work involved in feeding children well

But school food initiatives [will need continued support, evaluation](#) and investment to reach their full potential.

Part of this will depend on developing programs that acknowledge [the labor of connecting kids to food](#) and how it matters as part of caring for them.

As Canadian policymakers work towards improving school food programs and better supporting families' basic needs, we must acknowledge the vital roles of parents and lunch workers—and the

complex realities of what it takes to navigate the physical, emotional and cognitive work needed to feed children well.

Recognizing the labor of lunch

Our research finds the daily act of packing lunches is more than a mundane chore. Mothers' experiences of caring for children's food needs were complex and wrapped up in notions of what it means to be a "good" mom.

Being responsible for providing a "balanced" lunch required not only a nutritious meal, but balancing emotional, physical and cognitive work.

Feeding children is a complex and meaningful form of care that fosters connections between caregivers and children and [contributes to](#) nutritional and social well-being, and children's sense [of being cared for](#).

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