

# Lunchtime Life Lessons

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During my time at Community Park Elementary School, I was always jealous of the food that my best friend Erica had for lunch. We were both in Mrs. Goodwin's kindergarten class, and at 11:35 AM we would line up in single file outside of the classroom to go down to the cafeteria. I vividly remember my peers fussing about classmates "cutting" or "butt cutting" each other in line. Ten minutes would typically be wasted by the time we could actually walk down "quietly" to the lunchroom.

Once we got to the cafeteria, which was buzzing with other students who were either just sitting down to eat or packing up to go back to class, we would go to our designated table. Some students, including me, would head over to the gray plastic bin to get their lunch boxes. Other students, like Erica, would line up at the hot bar to get their meal. Even though I always brought food from home, I would go with Erica because best friends stuck together, and in all honesty I was envious of the privilege to buy lunch.

Erica would grab a tray from the stack of multi-colored trays and slide it down the long steel counter. The miserable lunch ladies would plop on Monday's Sloppy Joe on a white roll, Tuesday's classic beef hot dog on a bun, Wednesday's golden brown baked ziti, the breakfast for lunch on Thursdays (which was French toast sticks drenched in sticky maple syrup), and Friday's pizza with a gooey cheese-filled crust. Erica never asked for the overcooked vegetables, which were usually mushy green beans or corn, and I would reach into the refrigerator to grab her carton of chocolate milk. We would proceed to the checkout where Mary, the cashier, would greet us. Erica would punch in her four-digit account number to pay--something that I didn't even have--and then we would head over to the table with the napkin dispensers, condiments and utensils. As we walked to the table with the brown paper napkins, ketchup, mustard, salt and pepper packets, and plastic sporks and finally back to our table, I would eye her food, wishing that I could buy my own lunch from the cafeteria or even just have a taste of hers.

Once we both sat down, she would start eating and I would hesitantly zip open my rectangular neon orange lunch box to take out my ten-ounce black and silver thermos. My lunch was typically the previous night's dinner or some sort of canned organic soup that my mom heated up that morning. I was always extremely embarrassed about what I brought, so every day I would slowly screw off the lid of my thermos trying to prevent my meal's odor from filling the air.

I was frequently teased about my food by one of my classmates, Alex, who got others to look at me with faces of disgust. Not only did some of my peers stare at me as if I were an alien, but one of the plump lunch ladies, Ms. Pesky, hovered over and interrogated me about my food. She was probably seventy years old and would always ask in her nasal condescending voice, "So what kind of lunch do you have today, AmiLin?"

I would purposefully look away from her and gaze down at the floor from behind my thermos wishing I were invisible and softly utter, “Stir-fry cabbage with salmon and brown rice.”

She could never hear me so she would loudly blurt out, “What? I can’t hear you!”

I would respond by slightly tilting my thermos and showing her what was inside. She would make a repulsed face, back up a few steps and then exclaim, “Well that looks and smells strange!”

Both Ms. Pesky and what seemed to be everyone in the cafeteria stared at me for what felt like an eternity before she’d finally leave to finish making her rounds in the lunchroom. Even though I never liked Ms. Pesky and thankfully neither did any of my friends, she was praised by many of the other teachers. As a young girl of only six, I couldn’t do much to retaliate against her, so I spent kindergarten through third grade hating the food my mom packed for me. I always just wanted to have a *normal* lunch.

As the end of third grade rolled around, my parents decided that I should attend a very small private school in our town called Princeton Junior School. I absolutely didn’t want to leave all of my friends, but my mom forced me to visit the school one day in early June. Of course on the day of my visit my mom packed my lunch, but to my surprise there wasn’t a cafeteria, so everyone had brought his or her own meal as well. At lunchtime I reluctantly waited as my new friends took out their food, expecting to see peanut butter and jelly on Wonder Bread, a snack pack of Pringles and the distinct metallic blue wrapped Rice Crispy Treat that many of the other kids at my school had when they brought their lunches. Not surprisingly, one boy, Peter, brought just that. I was really nervous to open my lunch box since I thought that the kids sitting by me would make fun of my thermos filled with pungent food. However, when I looked to my left another girl, Kayla, was pulling out a thermos from her lunch box! She didn’t even hesitate to screw open the lid, grab her spoon and start eating her hot and sour soup. No one was rude to her as she ate, so I began to eat my lunch of rice and hot dogs with ketchup. My visit was nothing but positive since both the teachers and the students were extremely caring. Even though I still didn’t want to leave my routine back at Community Park, the following fall I attended Princeton Junior School. Relieved to know that I wouldn’t be made fun of for my food, I wasn’t nervous or embarrassed about bringing whatever my mom decided to give me.

After I graduated from fifth grade at Princeton Junior School, I attended Princeton Friends School for sixth through eighth grade. Luckily for me this was another small private school that didn’t have a cafeteria. One of my best friends, Ariana, was vegetarian, and she would regularly bring hummus wraps with lettuce and cherry tomatoes. My other friend Lexie, whose mom was from Haiti, would often bring traditional aromatic Haitian food. Towards the end of sixth grade I upgraded to a new sixteen-ounce navy blue thermos, and I no longer was trying to stop the savory smell of reheated Indian food, for instance, from wafting into the air. No one was rude to each other about what they brought, and lunchtime at school no longer made me ashamed about what I was eating.

Once I graduated from Princeton Friends School, I went back into the public school system in my town to attend Princeton High School. Princeton High School had a cafeteria, but I still brought my food from home. During the 25-minute lunch break, my friends and I would sit in the hallway

to eat. Even though others often questioned me about what I had brought, I no longer minded telling people about what was in my thermos. I didn't care that my food's aroma would fill the air, nor did I care about what anyone thought of my lunch. All that mattered was that I liked my meal. To my disbelief I even learned that some of my friends were actually jealous of what I brought. While sitting down to eat, my friend Katie would often comment, "You're so lucky that you don't have peanut butter and honey sandwiches on whole-wheat bread every single day for lunch."

I would smile and reply, "Yeah, I guess," while thinking to myself that having a variety of foods such as ratatouille with quinoa or quesadillas with tofu was something that I should have always appreciated.

Throughout my academic career not only did I learn that it is okay to be different from others around me, but I learned that changing environments can expose you to others who are similar to you. I also began to recognize that viewing situations from a positive standpoint helps you appreciate what you have. Looking back on my early elementary school days I am very thankful that my parents didn't allow me to buy the unhealthy, disgusting cafeteria food I once thought was in a sense holy. I am also grateful that my parents decided to send me to private school where I was able to meet other students who brought unusual food and where there weren't any rude lunch ladies nor students who would make fun of my meals. As I finish up my freshman year at American University, I realize now more than ever how special my mom's cooking is, and I constantly wish that I could have my thermos filled with leftovers from dinner instead of cafeteria food.