

Promote Healthy Eating in a Positive Way Frequently asked Questions

When promoting healthy eating, it is important to keep the focus on the positive, appealing aspects and its many benefits, rather than the negative aspects of unhealthy eating and health risks.

The following frequently asked questions will help you create a supportive school nutrition environment that is free from weight bias, weight-based teasing, rigid rules about healthy eating, and other unhealthy practices that may lead to unintended negative consequences.

Is it ok to make comments to students about the food in their lunches?

No. Making comments or judgments about a food or beverage in a child's lunch may be confusing for a child. They may wonder why their parent would allow some foods that are not approved of by the adults at school. Many factors (e.g., children's likes, cultural background, income, knowledge) influence what gets packed in lunches. As well, children may have little control over what gets packed. Remember, no one food or meal defines our eating habits as unhealthy.

Is it ok to tell students that they shouldn't eat their dessert until they have eaten the rest of the food in their lunch?

No. Allow all students – even kindergarten students, to make their own decisions about what and when to eat particular foods and beverages from their packed lunch. Although we recognize that it is tempting to make statements that encourage a child to eat certain foods first, this puts pressure on the child and will not help him/her make healthier food choices. When you ask a child to eat certain foods before they eat their dessert, you are sending a message that the dessert is the prize, which makes the desire for desserts even greater. Some children will end up eating more food even if they are not hungry, just to get the dessert. This may result in overeating and they could eventually lose the ability to tell when they are full. To help children learn to respond to their feelings of hunger and fullness, avoid making comments such as “You can only have your dessert if you finish your sandwich”.

Have a look at <http://brightbites.ca/badge/pack-it-up/> for resources to help anyone (e.g., parents and senior students) supervising students during eating-times. Make eating-times a pleasurable social experience.

What do I do if a student eats all of his or her lunch during morning recess?

If you have a student that continuously eats all of his/her lunch during morning recess and then has nothing to eat at the next break, it may require a phone call home to the parent/guardian to discuss how to address this concern. For example, the child may be eating their breakfast really early or they may need more food packed for the day. Students can be encouraged to access the universal student nutrition program in the school while solutions are being considered.

Is it ok to suggest to students who appear to be overweight to restrict their food choices?

No. Weight and weight loss should not be discussed with students. It is up to the students' parents/ guardians to seek medical advice for their child if there are concerns about body weight. Instead focus on creating and supporting a school environment that makes it easier for all students to engage in healthy eating behaviours. Keep in mind the following school-wide strategies to help support healthy attitudes to body image and eating habits among all students:

- Emphasize healthy eating and active living for all, regardless of weight and shape
- Ensure that all students of all shapes, sizes and appearance are equally valued and respected
- Discourage dieting in a non-judgmental way and encourage and model balanced, moderate eating from a variety of foods.

What if I suspect one of my students has an eating disorder?

If you suspect that a student may have an eating disorder, it is important to address the concern privately with the student's parents/guardians. You can also include the student if it is appropriate. Some of the signs and symptoms of eating disorders include:

- Excess concern about weight, shape and calories
- Feeling fat when not overweight
- Feeling guilty about eating
- Strict avoidance of certain foods or unusual eating habits
- Noticeable weight loss
- Frequent weight fluctuation.

Research shows that teaching students about eating disorders may be harmful, as some students may glamorize disturbed eating behaviours. It is best to teach students about healthy eating, active living, self-acceptance, media literacy, and how to cope with weight- and shape-teasing. It is also important to teach students that commenting on other people's weight is not acceptable.

Is it okay to reward students with food?

No. There are many ways to reward students without using food. For example, extra recess time, using non-food items (e.g., stickers, pencils) and privileges (e.g., dancing to music in the classroom for a fun break). Rewarding students with food can:

- Teach them to eat even when they are not hungry
- Teach them to like certain foods more because they are used as rewards
- Exclude students with food allergies or health issues.

Review <http://brightbites.ca/badge/its-an-honour/> for healthy and positive ideas for rewarding students.

How much time is enough time for students to eat their lunch?

Ensure students receive a full 20 minutes of eating time. Provide extra time to wash hands and get lunch bags on top of the 20 minute eating time. Schedule meals and snacks at appropriate times (e.g., not first thing in the morning or late in the day).

What is the best way to be a positive role model regarding healthy eating?

Being a positive role model for healthy eating is about words and actions. It involves eating and enjoying a variety of foods in the presence of students. When talking about food and eating, only positive comments should be made. Positive role models should not talk about their own appearance, body weight or shape, their latest diet, or someone else's body weight (e.g., 'I feel so fat after that weekend barbecue'). They shouldn't offer directions, suggestions or advice that would cause a student to want to diet or to lose weight. If you witness weight-related teasing, don't ignore it and instead intervene to stop the behaviour.