

Tips for Teaching about Healthy Eating

1. Include cross-curricular connections in the classroom

While focusing on the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum, make connections to healthy eating in other subjects, like math, art, language, science, etc. This will help students have a better, more in-depth understanding of the information. Studies show that this cross-curricular approach to teaching nutrition can help increase fruit and vegetable consumption, and decrease consumption of sugar and sugar-sweetened beverages. For example, students can do a writing exercise about a new fruit or vegetable they tried, or survey and graph their class preference for vegetables. For more ideas on cross-curricular connections visit: <http://brightbites.ca/badge/zesty-lessons/>.

2. Use experiential learning strategies to engage students in the learning process

Lectures, generic worksheets and textbooks are not as effective as teaching healthy eating behaviours using active involvement that emphasizes the positive aspects of healthy eating. Let students experience healthy food choices using the five senses: sight, taste, touch, hearing and smell. For example, consider the impact of showing students a picture of a kiwi fruit. Consider how much greater the impact would be if you brought in a kiwi and allowed them to see it, feel the fuzzy skin, smell it, see how the seeds are arranged inside the kiwi, and enjoy the texture and taste of the actual fruit. Consider exploring where kiwis are grown, how they are used in cooking and their nutritional value. Use every situation where food is available in the school as an opportunity to expose children to healthy options. Consider starting a school garden or cooking club to give students practical hands-on experiences to learn about food and nutrition as well.

3. Spread healthy eating lessons throughout the year

Keep healthy eating on the minds of students and help them to practice healthy eating behaviours by spreading healthy eating education throughout the year instead of in one short unit. Match it to different seasons, themes, holidays or events. Examples include:

- In September, focus on returning-to-school themes such as packing lunches or eating breakfast
- In the fall, explore local crops and harvest
- March is a great time to focus on healthy eating as this coincides with National Nutrition Month. Check out <http://brightbites.ca/badge/a-taste-of-nutrition/> for more information
- During warmer months, think about the influence of seasonal changes on food and beverage intake.

Take advantage of teachable moments. Whether the teachable moment is related to a healthy eating school event or a nutrition topic in the news, use these opportunities to inquire, discuss, debate and explore the topic more thoroughly. For example, investigate and chat about a news article about a new super food or a policy that was introduced related to school food and beverages.

4. Convey the facts about healthy eating using current and credible information

Help students learn about well-balanced eating patterns by teaching them about Canada's Food Guide and the four food groups. Canada's Food Guide is uniquely designed to reflect national issues and promote the nutritional health of Canadians.

Keep the focus of your healthy eating discussion on the importance of food to give us energy to learn, play and grow, as well as to provide nutrients to keep our bodies working well. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of paying more attention to food versus calories. Calories only tell you the energy you get from food and does not provide information about other important qualities of the food.

5. Make healthy eating education culturally relevant

Because students understand what is relevant to their lives, explore the eating patterns, food preferences, behaviours and unique health concerns of various cultural groups:

- Use food examples that children will know from their culture
- Use culturally representative materials or food in the classroom (e.g., cultural dishes, utensils and cookware)
- Ask students to talk about meal customs; cultural cooking and preparation methods; traditional significance of specific foods and the importance of foods during religious events/holidays.

6. Be a role model for students

School staff, especially teachers, can influence students through their own behaviour. Model healthy, active living every day to help students see the value and relevance of the healthy eating lessons they receive in the classroom. Being a positive role model for healthy eating is about words and actions. 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.

It is important for all school staff to understand and be aware of their own personal beliefs, values and practices regarding food, weight, dieting and body image as these may impact students. Studies show that when teachers are unaware of their own biases, they may unknowingly display prejudice to some and favoritism to others. Teachers should be cautious that their personal biases and beliefs do not interfere with what they teach.

7. Promote healthy eating in a positive way

Teach about balanced eating using Canada's Food Guide. Show students which food fits into the four food groups and teach them that other food can be enjoyed in moderation. To be more positive when teaching about healthy eating, food is better classified as 'everyday' and 'sometimes' food, versus 'good' and 'bad' foods. Foods high in nutrients are considered 'everyday foods'; and foods low in healthy nutrients (and have added fat, sugar or salt) are 'sometimes foods'.

Eating is an experience to be enjoyed and celebrated by all! When implementing activities to teach about or promote healthy eating, it is important to keep the focus of nutrition initiatives and messaging positive. Focus on the appealing aspects of healthy eating and its many benefits, rather than the negative aspects of unhealthy eating and the risks to health.

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.

Frequently asked questions about teaching and promoting healthy eating

Is it ok to talk to students or make comments 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).