

# Ways Educators Can Promote a Healthy Relationship with Food

What you say and do can shape your students' relationship with food. A healthy relationship with food contributes to students' physical development and supports their social and mental well-being. As you read the tips below, take a moment to reflect on your actions and words and how they may influence your students.

## 1. Emphasize enjoyment and positive aspects of eating

Help students understand how food impacts us in many ways. Here are some ideas:

- Recognize how food supports our physical, social, cognitive, and mental well-being.
- Honour foods' connection to culture, tradition, history, community, and the land.
- Encourage students to choose a variety of foods and flavours that they enjoy. A variety of foods over time helps to provide the nutrients the body needs.
- Make space for all foods when talking about food and nutrition.
- Emphasize how behaviours like physical activity, sleep, hydration, and regular meals and snacks can help students feel good.
- Encourage eating with others. Eating with others helps to foster social connections and communication skills. It brings enjoyment and an opportunity to spend quality time, share traditions, and be exposed to new foods.

## 2. Words matter! Use neutral language when talking about food

Here are some ideas:

- Call food by its name. Attaching judgement or labels to food such as 'good', 'bad', 'clean', 'junk', etc., may lead to students feeling 'good' or 'bad' for eating those foods. It can also lead to guilt, shame, and stress around eating which can create an unhealthy relationship with food.
- Use descriptive words to explain the sensory aspects of food such as colour, shape, smell, flavour, and texture. Examples are words such as 'crunchy', 'spicy', or 'round'. This helps students learn about, become familiar with, and accept new foods.
- Save nutrition education for the classroom rather than at mealtimes. Engage students in casual conversations during school meals and focus on non-food related conversations.

Here are some examples of language to use if talking about food:

### Try saying this:

### Instead of this:

**Drinking water keeps you hydrated so you can play and think.**

Don't drink juice or pop, they are bad for you.

**Eat what you like from your lunch and stop when you feel comfortably full.**

Finish your whole lunch, please.

**Eat what you want from your lunch in any order you like.**

You need to eat your sandwich before you have your brownie.

**I like that apples taste so juicy, crisp, and sweet.**

Snacking isn't good. If you snack, you should only snack on foods like apples that are good for you.

**Eating a variety of foods can help fuel your body and your brain.**

I don't eat a lot of pasta and bread because I don't want to gain weight.

**If you work on your assignment quietly, you can have 5 minutes of free time.**

If you work on your assignment quietly, you can have a chocolate.

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### 3. Respect roles around food and eating

Whether it is in the classroom, lunchroom, the cafeteria, recess or an after-school activity, adults and students have different roles around food. When you respect these roles, you can help support healthy relationships with food. Here's how:

#### Parents and caregivers:

- Decide **what** foods are packed for meals and snacks. As students get older, they may play a role in choosing foods from **what** is available at home or buying foods at the school cafeteria, nearby stores, or restaurants.

#### Students:

- Decide **if** and **how much** to eat from the food available. This includes eating food in the order they choose. Trust students when they tell you they are full or hungry for more. This allows students to trust what their bodies are telling them.

#### Schools:

- Plan **when** students will eat during the school day.
- Determine **what** foods are offered when food is sold or provided.
- Decide **where** food is eaten.
- Ensure students have enough time to eat their meals and snacks.
- Encourage social connection through casual, fun conversations at mealtime.
- Limit distractions at mealtimes (e.g., lunchtime movies, tablets, phones, etc.)

Resources to guide schools in **what** to offer when food is sold or provided at school:

- How to Create a Healthy Eating Environment  
[www.ahs.ca/nutrition/page6459.aspx](http://www.ahs.ca/nutrition/page6459.aspx)
- Healthy Eating at School  
<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/tips-for-healthy-eating/school/>

### 4. Reflect on actions around food and bodies

Messages and actions can impact students. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Use non-food rewards. Using food to reward behaviour, to comfort or soothe, or to coax students to do something, can undermine healthy eating habits and the natural ability to use hunger and fullness cues to regulate eating.
- Allow students enough time to enjoy and finish their meals and snacks. Limiting or taking food away from a student or not allowing a student to eat can make them anxious or worried that they might not get enough food or will be hungry. This can lead to eating whenever food is around rather than listening to hunger cues.
- Be a positive role model. Students notice adults' conversations, behaviours, and beliefs. They may worry and internalize behaviours such as negative body talk or restricting food to control body weight. They may begin to think and feel similar things about themselves leading to an unhealthy relationship with food and a poor body image.
- Focus on your own and others' personal attributes like kindness and tenacity instead of commenting on weight, height, or appearance.

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## For more information

Visit [www.ahs.ca/schoolnutrition](http://www.ahs.ca/schoolnutrition) and click on Healthy Relationship with Food.

Check out the Canada's Food Guide website ([Canada.ca/FoodGuide](http://Canada.ca/FoodGuide)) to learn about healthy eating patterns and how healthy eating is more than just what you eat:

- [Eat Meals with Others](#)
- [Enjoy Your Food](#)
- [Hunger Cues](#)

If you are concerned about a student because of an ongoing issue related to food, follow school policies and procedures. Use a family-centred approach rather than trying to address the issue with the student directly.

## More support

If you have questions about these topics, contact an AHS Public Health Dietitian at: [PublicHealth.Nutrition@albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:PublicHealth.Nutrition@albertahealthservices.ca)

Reference: Raise a healthy child who is a joy to feed (<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/>), Ellen Satter Institute, 2023.