



10 WAYS TO CREATE A Supportive Food Environment in Schools

Creating a supportive food environment in schools will make it easier for students to eat well and help them develop a positive relationship with food.



1. Involve students in preparing and growing food. The more we get hands on exposure to foods the better. Growing and preparing food helps increase students' interest in eating vegetables and fruit and can also help to foster mental well-being by building confidence and self-esteem. Chat with your school nurse to find out more about our Let's Get Cookin' program, starting a grow tower and other gardening ideas.



2. Talk about food in a neutral way. There are no good or bad foods. Labelling foods as "healthy" and "unhealthy", "sometimes foods" and "everyday foods", or "treats" and "junk food" can lead to black and white thinking about food. Instead of assigning labels or grouping foods by healthfulness, call food by its name. For example, broccoli, candy, hamburgers and cookies. Having a positive relationship with food means being comfortable eating a variety of foods that support both nutrition and enjoyment.



3. Make cross-curricular connections with food. The more students are exposed to a variety of foods, the better! There are lots of opportunities to use and learn about food in many subjects. For example, students can learn procedural writing by listing out the steps to make a yogurt parfait or learn graphing skills in math by surveying student's favourite fruit choice.



4. Rethink rewards. Rewards are commonly used to recognize achievements or to manage behaviour and often involve food. When food is used as a reward it can create lifetime habits of rewarding or comforting oneself with food, and places certain foods on a pedestal. Consider rewarding with positive recognition, extra free time, or school supplies.





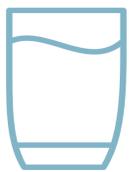
5. Fundraise with non-food fundraisers or with foods from Canada's Food Guide. Schools are often on the look-out for creative ways to make money. Consider offering balanced hot lunches with a variety of foods and fundraising with items such as greeting cards, plants or apples. Sometimes a simple option works best; try asking parents or caregivers to donate money directly.



6. Showcase a variety of foods at school events and celebrations. Food is more than nutrients and can be an important part of celebration, connection, and culture. Planning to offer a variety of food for everyone can normalize that all foods can be part of celebration and can be enjoyed without judgement. In addition to food, movement, music and special activities are an important part of celebrations. Why not add a dance party or special craft activity to your celebration?



7. Offer meals without distractions. Eating mindfully is part of Canada's Food Guide. Help students to pay attention to their bodies and the experience of eating by turning off screens during meal and snack times. Distraction-free eating allows students to connect and build relationships with others.



8. Make water easily available to all. Providing and promoting water can help prevent dental cavities, promote overall health, and help students and staff to think and feel better throughout the day. Promote water by ensuring water fountains are in good working condition, allowing students to keep water bottles at their desk, and providing water as a drink at school events.



9. Avoid commenting on students' lunches. It's easy to get frustrated when we see less nutritious foods being packed in students' lunches, but we can get in the way of children's learning to eat a variety of foods when we make comments about what they are eating. Lunches students bring to school are influenced by many factors (i.e., family income, parent work schedules, culture and familiarity). Students have varying levels of involvement in packing their own lunches and little influence on what their parents/caregivers are buying. Allow students to eat their food in any order they choose.



10. Respect all body sizes. Recognize that bodies come in all different shapes and sizes. A person's body size isn't an indicator of their health, and people of all body sizes are worthy and deserve respect. Avoid commenting negatively on your own body or other people's bodies. Keep conversations free of "diet talk" and teach students about natural body diversity and accepting, respecting and celebrating our bodies. Review **Mental Health and Weight Bias in Schools** for more information on how to make your school inclusive for all bodies.

If you'd like support in helping to make a change to your school food environment, contact one of our school health dietitians by emailing: healthyeating@swpublichealth.ca or healthyschools@mlhu.on.ca.

We are happy to help!