

TEACHING Food & Nutrition in the Classroom

The way we talk, teach, learn, and explore food in school impacts students' relationship with food.

The concept of food neutral is a new and evolving term and applying this approach ensures that what is taught in the classroom, to where, when and what foods are consumed are free of judgement, shame, stigma, and personal bias or beliefs.

What does food neutrality mean?

- Removing morality-based statements.
- Removing judgment, shame and comments about personal food choices.
- Referring to foods by their name.
- Considering the value of food beyond nutrition.

What does a food neutral approach look like?

- Refer to the food by its name.
- Avoid labelling food into "good" or "bad" and "healthy" or "unhealthy."
- Allowing students' to decide to eat food in the order they choose.
- Not using food as a reward or punishment for behaviour.
- Not commenting to students on what is brought in school lunches.

Using food neutral language aims to:

- **Remove stigma and judgement associated with certain foods.**
- **Reduce shame of food choices.** Students hearing messages of 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' food may question what their caregiver provides. Students have limited autonomy of what food is available to them as this is often decided upon by the parent/caregiver and influenced by many factors including family income, time, culture, cost of food, media, and food environment.
- **Encourage curiosity and exploration by presenting foods using neutral language.** Students are more likely to explore and try a variety of foods without preconceived notions.
- **Promote critical inquiry.** Students are encouraged to identify fad diets, seek out reliable sources of nutrition information, and critically think about food marketing.
- **Consider the value of food beyond nutrition.** Food is more than what we eat. A healthy dietary pattern considers when, where, why, how and who we eat with, as important components to food and eating.

RATIONALE

When talking about food, language is something most people do not think about. The language we use about food, is important because it can reflect personal beliefs and practices towards food. The traditional way of speaking about food and nutrition often uses negative language and problem based messages (e.g., sugar is “bad,” “junk” food). These well intended messages about food and nutrition can inadvertently cause distress; because children are not responsible for the types of food purchased. It can also lead to preoccupation and fear of food that send students down the path of dieting and disordered eating (O’Dea, 2000; Pinhasetal, 2013).

The many messages about food, health, and body are also further perpetuated by diet culture which is a system of beliefs that:

- Equates thinness with goodness and health.
- Promotes weight loss as a form of achieving status.
- Values certain ways of eating over others.
- Devalues bodies that do not fit the ‘image of health’ i.e. thin able-bodied.

This shift in approach aims to support a positive relationship with food whereby students (Satter, 2007):

- Are comfortable and flexible with eating
- They learn to accept a variety of foods
- They listen to their hunger and fullness cues and
- Develop food skills



WHY SCHOOLS?

Schools play a significant role in educating students about food and nutrition. Food education in schools can be delivered in a way that supports the development of health, promoting eating habits and a positive relationship with food in the long-term (Welch & Leahy, 2018). Food and nutrition education at school should not only focus on teaching students about nutrition needs for physical health, but also include how food supports our social and mental wellbeing and acknowledge the multiple factors that influence eating patterns.

The Ontario Curriculum – Health and Physical Education (Grades 1-8 and 9-12) provides teachers with overarching guidance and considerations that support the do no harm approach to communicating about food and nutrition:

“Students bring their learning home to their families, and they have variable amounts of control over the food they eat at home and the food they bring to school. Educators need to consider these realities and be aware of issues such as poverty, food allergies and sensitivities, eating disorders and weight preoccupation, and social and cultural practices in order to ensure that the learning is presented with sensitivity.”

SUGGESTED Approaches to Support Teaching Food & Nutrition

1. Recognize roles and responsibilities related to food and eating

Schools, parents/caregivers, and students all have a role in food and eating. Here is an overview of the roles and responsibilities for parents and caregivers, schools, and students.

Parents/Caregivers	School/Teachers	Students
Decide what food to provide students.	Decide when and where students eat.	Decide whether and how much to eat.
<p>Trust that families are doing their best to provide food for their children with the resources they have available.</p> <p>Recognize that most students do not have control over the food they eat. Adult roles include grocery shopping, meal planning, and food selection.</p>	<p>Ensure regular meal and snack breaks. Allow enough time and suitable space for eating at school.</p> <p>Save food and nutrition education for the classroom rather than at mealtimes. Be neutral and do not comment on what, whether, and how much students are eating.</p> <p>Provide access to food through the Student Nutrition Program</p>	<p>Trust students when they say or show that they are full, or they are hungry for more.</p> <p>Respect students' decisions, including eating food in the order they choose.</p>

What about School Nutrition Guidelines?

Provincial programs such as Student Nutrition Programs and the Ontario School Food and Beverage Policy (PPM 150), have specific nutrition guidelines/criteria for what foods can be offered to students. These guidelines provide direction on what foods to provide in schools and are intended for adults who are responsible for food purchasing and menu decisions. These guidelines do not apply to what students bring into their lunch.



2. Teach food using concepts of food exploration, experiential learning, and building skills

Learning approaches that focus on food exploration and food literacy can go further in supporting the life-long enjoyment of a variety of nutritious foods. For example:

- Practice describing foods based on their colour, shape, smell, flavour, and texture rather than its nutritional value.
- Create practical opportunities for students to learn about, see, smell, touch, grow, cook, and try a variety of foods.
- Food preparation and cooking activities helps students to build confidence and learn important life skills and cultural traditions.
- A healthy dietary pattern considers when, where, why, how, and which foods are consumed. Teaching can be expanded beyond ‘what’ foods students are eating to how foods can be prepared, who do they enjoy them with, why they may like those foods, when the foods are available and eaten, and where foods come from.
- Encourage food exploration through neutral exposures (e.g., avoid pressure to taste food).
- Look for ways to incorporate food literacy at school, such as food exploration opportunities through the curriculum, field trips to the farm to learn where food comes from (or virtual farm tours); and encouraging students to get involved in planning and packing their school lunches at home.

3. Apply food neutral language

Teaching the healthy eating curriculum using neutral language avoids judgement and assigning value-based labels. For example:

- Refer to food by its name. Avoid labelling or categorizing single foods or beverages as “good,” “bad,” “healthy” or “unhealthy.” These terms apply a moral value to food choices and by referring to food by its name, we remove any judgments about foods and the people eating them.
- Avoid using the term "diet" as it is often equated with a restrictive and/or prescriptive way of eating (e.g., fad diet). Using terms such as “eating patterns” is suggestive of eating habits over time.
- When teaching nutrition to youth, focus on science and the facts. Avoid morality-based statements such as “sugar is bad,” instead discuss what the nutrient is and what it does in the body (e.g., “sugar is a type of carbohydrate that is naturally occurring or added to food and drinks. All carbohydrates are broken down into sugar and used as our main source of energy”).

4. Consider stage of cognitive development

In addition to the use of neutral language, it is important to consider students' cognitive stage of development (e.g., Piaget's theory of cognitive development) given that young children may not be able to understand or apply abstract concepts (e.g., nutrients). Although the curriculum includes identifying key nutrients found in foods, these concepts may be difficult for younger ages to understand and apply this information.

5. Use evidence-based resources and teaching materials

Teachers can choose to use the examples and prompts that work for their classrooms that are consistent with neutral language, or they may develop their own approaches to ensure that the healthy eating curriculum is taught in a neutral way (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023).

When integrating the Canada Food Guide (CFG) messages, educators should be aware that food guide messages and other related resources may not be appropriate for all students. The language set out in the curriculum is geared to adults and may not be suitable language for students. For example, the image of the plate on the food guide may not represent foods or a pattern of eating for everybody. Also, the recommendations may not be financially accessible for students. Educators know their students best and are well positioned to select messaging and/or CFG supporting resources that are most appropriate to use with their students. The included table provides grade level examples, adopted from Brightbites curriculum resources.

Consider Brightbites.ca

Brightbites.ca supports educators in providing evidence-based information and resources about food, eating and bodies. It also provides an interpretation of the curriculum for each grade level, using a food neutral and body inclusive approach to help educators with activities/lesson plans to align with food neutral language based on grade.



SUGGESTIONS on how to apply CFG messages using neutral language

1. How to talk about foods recommended in CFG without referring to foods as "healthy" foods?

Key Messages:

- While a healthy eating pattern contributes to better health outcomes, it is important to understand that no one food or way of cooking makes a body healthy or unhealthy.
- Although, the term “healthy eating” is integrated in the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum; labelling single foods as “healthy/unhealthy” should be avoided.

Instead of referring to “healthy” foods when teaching students, educators can:

- Emphasize the importance of eating a wide variety of foods such as vegetables and fruit, protein foods and whole grain foods (without pointing out “healthy foods”).
- Talk about food in a neutral way by calling foods by their name.
- Make space for all foods when talking about food and nutrition.
- Prioritize experiential learning such as school gardens and cooking programs.
- Expose students to different foods and examples.
- Teach where foods come from, ways to eat/prepare foods, traditions, history, etc.

2. Ways to incorporate CFG messaging such as “Eat a variety of healthy foods each day” and “limit ultra-processed food”.

Key Messages:

- The eating patterns encouraged within CFG are flexible and not intended to be rigid and prescriptive. What matters most is what people consume on a regular basis (Government of Canada, 2022).
- Healthy eating patterns look different to everyone, and food choices depend on many factors including culture, traditions, health, and individual taste preferences.
- The ability of children, youth, and their caregivers to meet eating patterns encouraged within CFG is tied to access and resources such as money, time, space, skills, equipment, or support.
- When children and youth eat a variety of foods, they are more likely to get the nutrition their growing bodies and minds need.

Instead of focusing on “healthy foods each day” or “limiting certain foods” educators can:

- Focus on the benefits of fueling the mind and body with a variety of food.
- Emphasis that no food or type of food can provide us with everything we need.
- Refer to the food groupings in CFG without assigning any moral value or judgement to foods.

3. Ways to teach about the health benefits of food

Key Messages:

- Food is one of many things that helps our body grow and develop, such as getting enough sleep, playing, or participating in other physical activities, and feeling good about ourselves (Province of British Columbia, 2021b).
- For younger children, talk about what food gives us in the present moment (e.g., enjoyment, comfort, connection to friends and family, energy to grow, play and learn) and/or how eating a variety of foods supports our mental health.
- When it is necessary (i.e., curriculum expectations), to teach older students about nutrition and chronic disease prevention (e.g., diabetes, heart disease) use neutral language to talk about food, while also acknowledging the role of many other factors in determining health.
 - There are many factors that cause disease, including genetics and the social determinants of health. The causes of disease are complex and are strongly associated with social determinants of health such as income, access to resources, education, and housing (Province of British Columbia, 2021c).
- All nutrients are important, too much or too little can cause health problems.
- Eating regularly and consistently throughout the day provides the energy needed for growth and development.

Educators can:

- Emphasize how behaviours such as physical activity, sleep, hydration and regular meals and snacks contributes to health and well-being.
- Discuss foods' connection to culture, tradition, history, community, and the land.



How can concerns regarding "unhealthy" food and beverages in a student's lunch be addressed?

What to Say/Do:

- Outside of safety concerns, such as food allergens that are not allowed in the classroom, schools should not be providing direction about what children can eat from their packed lunches.
- Reinforce mealtime roles.
 - Maintaining these roles is important in helping children learn to respond to their hunger and fullness cues and to develop a positive relationship with food.
 - Emphasize that students don't have control over the foods that are included in their lunch.
 - Families select foods based on what's available, their income, values, cultural food norms, time, food skills, accessible and familiar to them and their child, and what their child will eat at school, etc.
 - Judging packed lunches undermines the trust and connection between the child and the caregiver.
- Rigid rules can take away their ability to listen to body cues of hunger and fullness.
- Share the "Nurturing Healthy Eaters in the Classroom" resource (elementary, secondary) and "School Lunch Your Kids will Munch", both available from ODPH website.
- Be a positive role model. This involves enjoying a variety of food in the presence of students, and practicing positive self-talk (e.g., my body feels great after a walk, I enjoy how I feel after morning yoga).
- Provide universally accessible breakfast, snack, or lunch programs at school.
- Using non-food classroom rewards such as pencils, stickers or a "student of the day" program.
- Provide students the opportunity to practice food skills at school.



RESOURCES **for Educators**

BrightBites.ca

Offers free resources, lesson plans and activity ideas to support teachers. Educators can utilize this website to build knowledge, competence, and confidence in creating teaching and learning environments that are grounded in a food neutral and body inclusive approach.

You're the Chef (YTC)

Is a classroom program designed for students in grades 5-8 to teach students about cooking and food handling skills. CKPH offers on-line training for school staff and volunteers who would like to become a YTC leader.

Food is Science

Provides resources to support educators to teach food literacy for grades 3-9 to meet the Science and Technology curriculum expectations.

Canada's Food Guide Toolkit for Educators

Provides activities to help students learn food skills, develop healthy eating patterns, and understand Canada's food guide.

Ontario Dietitians in Public Health

Provides resources on ways to create supportive food environments and information for parents/caregivers. To find out more visit: School Nutrition Resources (odph.ca).



EXAMPLES of Curriculum Activities by Grade Level

Grade	Activity Examples (Healthy Living Curriculum)
<div>K-3</div> <div><div>▪ D1.1</div><div>▪ D2.1</div><div>▪ D2.2</div><div>▪ D3.1</div></div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Experiential activities that expose students to a variety of foods, as it is more likely that students will be open to eating many different foods that support a healthy eating pattern (e.g., Student Nutrition Programs, assignments about students' cultural foods and traditions).■ Food exploration and describing foods based on the senses, for example, by colour, shape, texture, and/or smell.■ CFG is introduced in a neutral way without designating foods as healthy/unhealthy or everyday/sometimes. For example, students learn to identify and sort foods based on CFG food groupings.
<div>4</div> <div><div>▪ D1.1</div></div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Nutrients can be introduced in a neutral way by discussing what nutrients do for the body (e.g., carbohydrates and fat give us energy, protein supports muscles and strength, calcium, vitamin D and zinc keep bones and teeth strong, sugar in foods provides energy but can also cause cavities if it stays on our teeth).
<div>5</div> <div><div>▪ D2.1</div></div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Food labels can be explained as a tool that helps us compare products without moral judgment. Try a scavenger hunt-type activity where students are asked to find a food with 3g of fibre or food with milk in the ingredient list.
<div>6</div> <div><div>▪ D2.1</div><div>▪ D3.1</div></div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Discuss the value of eating a variety of foods to support mental health.■ Encourage discussions about how society influences our food choices (what helps or doesn't help us make a variety of food choices).■ Explore food systems and food waste (e.g., how we can help reduce food waste).
<div>7-8</div> <div><div>▪ D2.1</div><div>▪ D3.1</div></div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Don't do activities that require food, calorie, or nutrient intake tracking. Use CFG and focus activities on eating behaviours (e.g., how often do I help prepare meals) instead of tracking intake of certain foods or food groups.■ If teaching about health disorders (e.g., diabetes, heart disease) or the role of nutrients, use neutral language to talk about food, while also acknowledging the role of other factors in determining health. This is a video explaining the Social Determinants of Health. For more information on this topic visit: What are the social determinants of health? Canadian Public Health Association (cpha.ca)■ Discuss mindful eating (e.g., without distraction from devices) and being aware of the influence of food marketing through media literacy. Find out more about adapting intuitive eating for neurodivergent students here.■ Teach how to apply food group information to meal or snack planning by focusing on choosing a variety of foods that students enjoy as well as experimenting with new foods.■ Students can be asked to create their own definition of a healthy eating pattern.