Helping Secondary Schools Promote Healthy Eating in a Positive Way

If you are a teacher, staff or volunteer who promotes healthy eating at a secondary school, this resource is for you.

To ensure that healthy eating initiatives support mental well-being, it is important to keep the focus of any healthy eating initiative on the positive, appealing aspects of healthy eating and its many benefits, rather than the negative aspects of unhealthy eating and the risks to health. The school environment should be a place where students and staff enjoy eating well, being physically active, and talk about their lifestyle habits and body in a positive way. It should be free from weight bias, weight–based teasing, rigid rules about healthy eating and other practices, as these can trigger eating problems among students.

# Frequently asked questions about promoting healthy eating in Secondary Schools

## Do the things I do and say affect student’s body image and self-esteem?

Yes, your students are always watching and listening. What you say and do has an impact on what students see as “normal.” “Normal” should focus on positive rather than negative messages. Teachers and staff should avoid commenting on their own and other people’s weight and appearance at school. When students hear adults criticizing or admiring the bodies of others, they may copy this behaviour by teasing other students about their bodies. Students may also assume that adults will look at them and judge their bodies. If students’ hear adults express dissatisfaction with their bodies, they may place inappropriate importance on physical appearance and think that being an adult means being unhappy with your body.

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| Focus on | Try to Avoid |
| Encouraging students to eat well, be active and feel good about themselves | Making assumptions about how well or poorly a student eats based on their weight or appearance |
| Making positive comments about your accomplishments like learning a new skill or trying a new recipe  | Making comments (either positive or negative) about your own body or someone else’s |
| Talking about improvements in strength, endurance and skills  | Talking about dieting or weight loss  |
| Changing the subject or re-directing conversations about body size (e.g. ask about weekend plans)  | Engaging in conversations about diets, weight loss and body size |
| Complimenting people on their personal qualities and traits | Complimenting people on their appearance or weight loss |

## What is the best way to be a positive role model for 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. Experts recommend that adults model a flexible approach to eating and exercise, and not comment on a student’s weight, to help create an environment that supports healthy eating. When talking about food and eating, only make positive comments. Positive role models do 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 don’t offer directions, suggestions or advice that would cause a student to want to diet or to lose weight. Positive role models intervene if weight-related teasing occurs at school. If you witness weight-related teasing, don’t ignore it and instead intervene to stop the behaviour.

## What should I do if I hear weight-based teasing?

Weight-based teasing is often reported as one of the most frequent types of bullying/harassment experienced in the school environment. Start by following your school’s bullying prevention plan. If you hear weight teasing, discuss the comments with the students to help them realize how harmful their behaviour is. Teachers should be able to examine their own biases to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment. Try holding a classroom meeting to set expectations around teasing and bullying. Students can help set and implement classroom policies. For more information and tips to reduce weight bias in your school and classroom go to RUDD Centre for Food Policy & Obesity: <http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/weight-bias-stigma>

## How can I practice/model body weight sensitivity?

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| Focus on | Avoid |
| Modifying activities to be inclusive of all skill levels without having the focus on any one student. Have all students set their own personal goals that they can achieve and feel accomplishment from | Having activities where some students will be singled out because they are physically unable to do it. |
| Intervening right away when you observe weight teasing from any student.  | Ignoring weight teasing, or being inconsistent when intervening. |
| Using the terms ‘sometimes’ and ‘everyday’ foods  | Describing foods using words such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ which can lead to feelings of guilt and body image dissatisfaction |

## Is it okay to weigh students to measure success?

No, it is never appropriate to weigh students at school. Students are still growing and the number on the scale is not going to provide any valuable information, especially considering the variation in body types and developmental stages from one student to another. Weighing students does not serve a purpose in a school setting.

## Should I calculate BMI (Body Mass Index) with students?

No, BMI should not be used with students at school. BMI is not a good measure of health in children. It does not take into account body composition, frame size and muscle. Research shows that measuring and comparing BMI amongst students, can result in those with a higher BMI, to feel more compelled to lose weight using unhealthy means (e.g., unhealthy eating practices with adverse physical and emotional consequences). By calculating a student’s BMI, teachers may inadvertently trigger a desire to be thinner.

## Should I discuss eating disorders with students?

Teaching about eating disorders in school does not support mental health and well-being and may even put some teenagers at risk of disordered eating themselves.

Schools can create a healthy eating environment that helps prevent eating disorders by providing the following:

* training for educators and parents that raise awareness about the role they play in influencing the development of body image for children and youth
* training for educators and parents on how to role model healthy behaviours
* training for educators and parents to recognize and act on incidents of weight discrimination
* media literacy and life skills curriculums for all students
* school policies that address weight-based teasing/bullying
* opportunities for physical activity for all students regardless of their size or shape

If you suspect that a student may have an eating disorder, it is important to discuss your concerns with the parents/guardians rather than the student directly.

## How do I teach students about healthy eating and physical activity without talking about weight?

Avoid linking weight to healthy eating and physical activity. If the topic of weight is brought up in the classroom, re-frame or re-direct the discussion to talk about health instead. Teachers should promote healthy eating and physical activity as ways of maintaining a healthy body and feeling good. When teaching about healthy eating, the goal is for proper nutrition so the body and mind can function well and be healthy, and for the enjoyment of eating a variety of foods. The goal of being active is to have a healthy, strong and flexible body, and to have fun being active with friends and family. A healthy body will happen naturally if these key things are in place so it is best to avoid discussing body weight altogether. The focus should be on health, which looks different for everybody and may not equate to being thin.

## How do I teach about calories and nutrients?

The school curriculum expresses the importance of paying more attention to nutrients than to calories. Calories only tell you the energy you get from foods and don’t differentiate between foods or take other qualities of foods into account. When teaching, provide a basic description that calories are the energy that comes from food. Avoid activities that involve counting or comparing calories, instead focus on the importance of different nutrients and how they can be obtained through a variety of foods.

## Is it ok to make comments to students about the foods they eat at school?

No, making comments or judgments about a food or beverage that students eat at school is inappropriate. Allow all students to make their own decisions about what and when to eat particular foods and beverages during the school day. Although it is tempting to make statements that encourage a student to eat certain foods or when to eat certain foods (i.e. “eat your cookie after you’ve eaten your lunch”) this puts pressure on the student and will not help him/her make healthier food choices. Many factors (e.g., student's likes, parent choices, cultural background, income, knowledge) influence what students eat. Remember, no one food or meal defines our eating habits as unhealthy. Instead work to ensure that students have safe and pleasant areas to eat, appropriate lunch times, and access to healthy food choices in the cafeteria.

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

No, do not discuss weight and weight loss with students of any size. It is up to the students’ parents/guardians to seek medical advice for their student if there are concerns about body weight. Don’t make assumptions about a student’s lifestyle (activity or food intake) based on their weight or physical appearance. Weight does not always equate to nutritional intake. Instead focus on creating and supporting a school environment that makes it easier for all students to engage in healthy eating behaviours. The following school-wide strategies support healthy attitudes to body image and eating habits among all students:

* Emphasize healthy, balanced 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
* Encourage staff to model balanced, moderate eating from a variety of foods

## Is it okay to reward students with food?

No. Rewarding students with food may teach them to eat when they are not hungry, promote preference for certain foods used as rewards, exclude students with food allergies or health issues, and increase the risk of binge eating and other types of eating disorders. There are many ways to reward students without using food. For example, early dismissal, reduced or no homework, free time in the gym or library.

For more information on school nutrition topics, visit [york.ca/schoolnutrition](https://www.york.ca/wps/portal/yorkhome/health/yr/nutrition/nutritionforschools/)