For Teachers and Educators:

Tips for teaching about healthy eating effectively

## Include cross-curricular connections in the classroom

While focusing on the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum, make connections to healthy eating ‘across the curriculum’. 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 strengthen their research and writing skills while highlighting an exotic vegetable or fruit, or they can sharpen their math skills while learning about reading labels and appropriate serving sizes. For more ideas on cross-curricular connections visit: <http://brightbites.ca/badge/zesty-lessons/>.

## Use experiential learning strategies to engage students in the learning process

Healthy eating behaviour is affected more by active involvement that emphasizes the positive aspects of healthy eating than by lectures, generic worksheets and textbooks. Use experiential learning whenever possible; let students experience healthy food choices using the five senses: sight, taste, touch, hearing and smell. For example, imagine the reaction you would get from showing students a picture of a kiwi fruit. Then imagine their response if you brought in a kiwi and allowed them to see it, feel the fuzzy skin, see how the seeds are arranged inside the kiwi, and enjoy the texture and taste of the actual fruit. Explore 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.

## Spread healthy eating lessons out throughout the year

To keep healthy eating on the minds of students and help them to practice healthy eating behaviours, spread healthy eating education throughout the year instead of covering the expectations 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.
* Explore local crops and harvesting during the fall season.
* March is a great time to focus on healthy eating as this coincides with National Nutrition Month.
* 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 something about nutrition in the news, use these as teaching opportunities to discuss, debate and explore the topic more thoroughly. For example, investigate and chat about a unique food offered for the school breakfast or snack program.

## 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](http://www.canada.ca/foodguide). 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 nutrients versus calories. Calories only tell you the energy you get from food and does not provide information about the other qualities of the food.

## 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 (eg, 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.

## Be a role model for students

School staff, especially teachers, can influence students through their behaviour. Model healthy, active living every day to help students see the value and relevance of their classroom healthy eating lessons. Avoid making comments about your own appearance or talking about losing weight. Share your enjoyment of all foods for well-being and enjoyment.

## Promote healthy eating in a positive way

To create a more positive message when teaching about healthy eating, food is better classified as ‘everyday’ and ‘sometimes’ food, versus ‘good’ and ‘bad’ foods. Food which is high in nutrients and belongs to a food group is considered an ‘everyday food’ and food which is low in healthy nutrients (and has added fat, sugar or salt) is a ‘sometimes food’. Teach about balanced eating using Canada’s Food Guide. Show students which food fits into the food groupings of the [Eat Well plate](http://www.canada.ca/foodguide) and teach them that other food can be enjoyed in moderation.

Eating is an experience to be enjoyed and celebrated by all! Focus on the positive, appealing aspects of healthy eating and its many benefits rather than the negative aspects of unhealthy eating and the risks to their health. For example, prompt students with ‘healthy eating makes me feel…’ rather than ‘unhealthy eating makes me feel…’ For more information about promoting healthy eating positively without harming, please review the frequently asked questions about teaching and promoting healthy eating on the next page.

# 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?

Making comments or judgments about a food or beverage may be confusing to a child as they may question why their parent allows some things that their teacher doesn't approve of. Many factors (e.g., children's likes, culture, income, knowledge) influence what gets packed in lunches. As well in some cases, 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 their lunch?

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. Research shows that this helps them learn to respond to their feelings of hunger and fullness and to develop a healthy relationship with food. Avoid comments such as “You can only have the cookie if you finish your sandwich” or “You can’t eat your cookie for morning snack”. If you have a student that continuously eats their whole lunch during morning recess and then has nothing to eat at lunch, it may require a phone call home to the parent/guardian to discuss how to address this concern.

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. Remember it’s the students’ right to:

* Choose what to eat from their lunch bag
* Eat as little or as much of the food as they want

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

All students should be given the same messages about health and nutrition through the delivery of the Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum. ***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 school environment that makes it easier for all students to engage in healthy eating behaviours.

**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 parents (you can 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.

## What is the best way to be a positive role model regarding healthy eating?

Being a positive role model for healthy eating is about words and actions. It involves eating and enjoying a variety of nutritious foods in the presence of students. When talking about food and eating, only positive comments should be made. Positive role models do not talk about their own body weight, 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 only intervene if weight-related teasing occurs at school.

It is important for all school staff to develop knowledge and insight into their own personal beliefs, values and practices regarding food, weight, dieting and body image and the impact that their beliefs may have on their students. For example, a teacher who was teased as a child for being overweight may have a prejudice against children who are naturally thin. Or a teacher who values healthy eating may look down on a student who is overweight or doesn’t eat a healthy diet. Studies show that when teachers are unaware of their own biases, they may unknowingly display prejudice to some and favoritism to others. It is important that teachers be aware of and monitor the effect that their biases may have on students in their classroom. They will support their students so that their personal biases and beliefs do not influence what they teach.

## 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 (ie, not first thing in the morning or late in the day).

## Is it ok to reward students with food?

There are many ways to reward students without using food, for example, extra recess time, using non-food items (eg, stickers, pencils) and privileges (eg, 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.