



Talking About Food and Eating with Youth

What is the best way to teach students about eating?

The best way to teach students about eating is through a positive and inclusive approach. Place the focus on the importance of food to give us energy to learn, play, grow and keep our bodies functioning. Reinforce that eating looks different for everyone and will depend on many factors including family and cultural context, food access and availability, personal preferences, allergies and intolerances, and personal experiences.

Should I teach students about calories and nutrients?

Children are concrete thinkers and it is not until age 12 that they start to understand abstract concepts such as nutrition. For students in grades K-8, rather than emphasizing the health benefits of certain foods, try to inspire curiosity about food through experiential learning and food exploration. Emphasizing health benefits does not support learning to accept foods and can lead to anxiety for some students. Focusing on building skills related to growing, identifying and preparing foods can go further in supporting the life-long enjoyment of a variety of foods.

Should I be talking about “unhealthy foods” or “junk foods”?

Try talking about all foods in a neutral manner. Labelling food into “good or bad”, “healthy or unhealthy” categories promote “all or none” thinking without considering the many factors that influence eating patterns including food skills, convenience, food availability and socioeconomic and family situation.



While it is true that some foods are more nutritious than others, that doesn't mean they are superior foods. There are many ways that food can promote health and fuel our bodies. Some foods provide us with energy, pleasure or have cultural significance, and sometimes it is simply the social aspect of eating that allows food to contribute to our mental well-being.

How can I support students to listen to their hunger and fullness cues?

Our bodies provide us with internal cues, such as hunger and fullness signals, that can guide us to eat the types of food our body needs in the right amounts. It is important to encourage children to follow these cues.

Human beings have long tied food to emotion, culture and tradition; this means that sometimes people eat for reasons other than hunger. These reasons can be in response to positive or negative emotions, celebrations or daily routines. Teach students the difference between physical and emotional reasons for eating. Physical hunger is based on the biological need for food. Emotional hunger can lead us to eat in response to feelings such as sadness, anxiety, happiness or anger. Emotional eating is normal and can be an effective coping strategy when used moderately and in combination with other non-food-based strategies.

Positive eating habits include enjoying all foods without experiencing feelings of fear or guilt around eating particular foods.

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