Interior Health

Talking Tips for School Food Providers

The way we talk about food and eating with students matters. School meal and snack programs should be safe spaces for all students to experience connection and be supported to develop a positive relationship with food and eating.

What does it mean to have a positive relationship with food and eating?
It can be different for everyone and often includes enjoying a variety of foods without fear or guilt and listening to natural hunger and fullness cues. This plays a key role in supporting both physical and mental health.

Children and youth eat better when they aren't pressured about food and eating.

School food providers are volunteers or staff that prepare and/or distribute school meal and snack programs to students.

It works best when adults and students take on separate roles during meal and snack times.

At school adults are responsible for:

- What food is offered at school meal and snack programs
- When food is offered (meal and snack time schedule)
- Where food is offered (cafeteria vs classroom, etc.)

Students are responsible for:

- How much food to eat (and in what order)
- Whether to eat a particular food, or anything at all

Allowing students to eat without interfering helps to create a relaxed space where students are more likely to enjoy eating a variety of foods.

Words Matter

Research shows that labeling food as "unhealthy," "junk food," or "treats" can lead to feelings of shame and guilt around eating.

Children and youth are also less likely to try foods that are labeled as "healthy" and may assume these foods are less tasty.

Call a food by its name or simply call it "food."

Common scenarios and suggested approaches

The following examples show ways to talk about food and eating that support students to have a positive relationship with food.

Scenario	Suggested Approach / Rationale
1. You feel that a student is taking or eating too much food. *"Can I have two pieces of toast?"* A student comes back for seconds or thirds. *"Can I have more?"*	Appetites vary greatly from student to student and day to day. Ideally you have prepared enough food so students can have as much as they like and don't feel food is in limited supply. Reassure all students that there is enough food for everyone, and they are welcome to come back for more. Note: there are students who may not get enough to eat outside of school and worry about getting enough food to eat. When food is limited, a natural response is for students to take more when they can. **Words to try** *"Yes, you may have more/two pieces, there is plenty for everyone."* If a situation arises where there is a limited supply of a particular food you could say: *"Let's make sure everyone gets the chance to have one piece first, then you can come back for more."*
2. A student takes only a small amount of food and/or eats very little of what is on their plate.	Trust students to eat the amount that is right for them. Pressuring a student to eat interferes with their ability to tune into their own hunger and fullness cues. Consider that the student: • May not like/be familiar with the food • May not be hungry • May be feeling unwell (emotionally, illness, stress, etc.) • May already have eaten food from home **Words to try** No comment needed Or *"Are you done eating? You don't need to finish this if you don't want to."*
3. A student fills their plate with food and doesn't eat it. Later you see this student throwing the food in the garbage.	Sometimes students misjudge how much food they are hungry for, or they discover they don't like a food after tasting it. Other times they run out of time to eat. Food waste is a normal outcome of children learning to eat the amount that is right for their bodies and learning to accept new foods. Note: if you have concerns about food waste, consider if composting is an option. **Words to try** No comment needed for the individual student.

Scenario	Suggested Approach / Rationale
4. A student takes only one type of food at breakfast or lunch even though several different food options are available.	Students are responsible for choosing what and how much to put on their plate from what you have offered. It can be normal for students to eat only one or two foods at a meal or snack. Children and youth tend to eat a variety of foods and nutrients over the course of a few days to adequately meet their needs. **Words to try** No comment needed.
5. You see a student that usually participates in the school snack program eating candy from their lunchbox at morning snack time.	Students may choose to participate in school meal and snack programs on some days and not on others. Students decide what food to eat from their lunchbox without judgement. Even though all foods may not be nutritionally equal, labeling foods as "good" or "bad" can create feelings of guilt or shame about eating. Note: often students do not have control over the foods that are packed in their lunches. Food choices of the parent/caregiver are based on many factors including affordability. Suggest resources and tips for packing school lunches be shared by the school with all parents throughout the year. **Words to try** No comment needed.
6. At lunchtime, a student is eating their cookies before their sandwich and apple from the "brown bag lunch" provided by the school.	Let students decide what order to eat their food. When a variety of foods are consumed, students will gain adequate nutrition regardless of what order food is eaten. **Words to try** No comment needed.
7. A student refuses to try a new food.	It might take time for a student to be willing to try a new food you are serving (up to 15 or more exposures). A student may never like a certain food and that is okay. Avoid pressuring them to eat a food. It can delay the process of learning to accept it. Note: if this is a regular occurrence for the same student, it could be an opportunity to get curious (e.g. does the menu contain foods that are familiar or culturally appropriate for the student?). **Words to try** *"You don't have to try or eat anything you don't want to."* *"This will be on the menu another day and you'll have a chance to try it then if you want to."*

Scenario	Suggested Approach / Rationale
8. A student never seems to eat fruit or vegetables offered in the breakfast or lunch program.	Respect the student's choice to decide what to eat from what is offered / provided. Continue to offer a variety of fruits and vegetables to all students. You never know when a student may be ready to try something they have previously refused. Some students have specific dislikes or sensory issues, and it's important to respect their feelings and concerns. Consider these strategies that apply to all students: • Prepare fruits / vegetables in different ways (e.g. apple wedges, dried apples, applesauce, baked apples, with yogurt dip, in a fruit salad, etc.). • Cut up fruits / vegetables may be preferred over whole fruits / vegetables as it is easier to try a small amount. • Describe foods using texture, taste, colour, etc. instead of focusing on nutrients (e.g. "These peppers are crisp and sweet," not "These peppers are a healthy snack because they have vitamin C"). • Share where the vegetable or fruit was grown (if you know), to help students make a connection with the food (e.g. local farm). **Words to try** No comment needed.
9. A student says "Yuck" to a food you are serving.	Teach students other ways to refuse food they don't enjoy eating. **Words to try** *"It's ok not to like a food, you can say:* • *No thank you,* • *I don't like it, or* • *I'd rather not try any today."*