

Talking About Food and Eating with Youth

Supporting a Neutral and Inclusive Approach in the Classroom

What's the best way to teach students about food and eating?

The best approach is positive, inclusive, and neutral. Emphasize that food fuels us with the energy we need to learn, play, grow, and function each day. Remind students that eating looks different for everyone and is shaped by many factors—such as cultural or family traditions, food access, personal preferences, allergies, and individual experiences. Show interest in all types of food without judgment and celebrate cultural, religious, and personal food practices. Use books, stories, or classroom discussions that reflect a variety of food experiences. During food-related activities, create a calm, welcoming space where students can choose whether to taste or handle food, and offer alternatives when needed to include everyone.

Should I teach students about calories and nutrients?

Children in Kindergarten to Grade 8 are still developing abstract thinking skills. Instead of focusing on nutrition facts or the health benefits of specific foods, encourage curiosity through hands-on learning and food exploration. Offer samples of fruits, vegetables, or whole grains, especially ones students may not have tried before, and invite them to describe the taste, texture, and smell using sensory words. Try growing herbs or lettuce in small containers to help students learn where food comes from. Ask students to bring in a family food story or favorite recipe to celebrate cultural diversity. These activities help build skills, reduce food anxiety, and support a positive relationship with eating.

Should I talk about “unhealthy” or “junk” foods?

Avoid labelling foods as “good” or “bad”, “healthy” or “unhealthy”. These categories encourage black-and-white thinking and don't reflect the complex factors that shape how and what people eat – like time, access, culture, or family routines. While some foods are more nutrient-rich, that doesn't make

them better or more valuable. Food also contributes to joy, connection, and culture, and all of these support our health and well-being.

Instead of using labels, refer to food as by their actual names, like saying “cookies” instead of “junk food” or “broccoli” instead of “healthy food.” This neutral language helps reduce judgement and supports a more positive relationship with all types of food.

How can I help students to tune in to their hunger and fullness cues?

Help students understand that our bodies naturally signal when we are hungry or full, and these cues guide us in deciding what and how much to eat. Use simple language to explain what physical hunger feels like, such as a growling stomach, low energy, or feeling empty, and help students notice these sensations before meals or snacks. Ask students to consider whether their stomach is feeling hungry or are they feeling something else like boredom or sadness when reaching for food. This builds awareness without judgement.

Remind students that eating isn’t always about physical hunger, food is also tied to emotions, routines, traditions, and celebrations. Teach them the difference between eating for physical reasons and emotional reasons. Emotional eating is normal and can be one way people cope with feelings, especially when balanced with other coping strategies. Encourage students to explore other ways to manage emotions, like drawing, playing, going for a walk, or talking with someone. Support students in developing a positive relationship with food, one that allows them to enjoy a variety of food without guilt, fear or shame.

Adapted from ‘A Tool for Every Educator’ with permission from the KFL&A.