

# Food Neutrality for Educators



This guide supports educators in creating a supportive food environment in their classroom by following a Food Neutral approach. Links to articles, videos, books, and websites, are shared for educators to review to gain a deeper understanding of food neutrality and how it can support students' well-being. This resource supports the Food Neutrality Educator Presentation.

Our individual experiences with food, shaped by early eating experiences, are profoundly unique and impactful. Schools and teachers significantly shape children's understanding of nutrition (Cotton et al., 2020). Having a positive relationship with food supports students' development as well as their social and mental well-being (Alberta Health Services, 2023).

## Defining Diet Culture

Everyone has different opinions about what healthy eating looks like. Unfortunately, many of these ideas come from "diet culture." Diet culture consists of:

- viewing thinness as ideal and fatness as negative
- linking someone's food choices to their moral worth
- encouraging dieting or food restriction as the main way to be healthy
- classifying foods or establishing a food hierarchy, elevating some foods above others
- oversimplifying the relationship between food and health
- believing individuals have complete control over their health

Diet culture ignores the social determinants of health such as income, food access, and housing. Often, these factors are out of our control and greatly impact eating habits. By failing to consider the influence of these variables, this view can cause negative feelings around food like shame or guilt (Harrison, 2018). Diet culture shows up in healthcare, the workplace, and education settings.

Diet culture can show up in our schools in the following ways:

- how we talk about food at celebrations or special events
- weight or size-based bullying
- how we teach about food in curriculum, health lessons, and informal conversations
- how we talk about or monitor contents of students' (or colleagues) lunches
- images used in books, media, and decorations

Efforts to encourage children to eat more nutritious foods are well intended, however, we now know that sharing information on the nutritional value of foods to promote positive eating habits in children and students may not have been effective. Additionally, messages promoting “healthy eating” can be harmful, can reinforce weight-based stereotypes, and may contribute to the development of eating disorders and disordered eating.

## What is Food Neutrality?

Words such as “good”, “bad”, “healthy”, and “unhealthy” are often used to describe foods. How we talk about food matters. The labels we assign to foods can create feelings of guilt and shame, impacting how we view ourselves for eating certain foods. We all eat differently, and what or how you eat does not determine your value as a person. Foods provide so much more than nutrients or fuel; all foods have value.

Food neutrality is an approach that removes the shame, guilt, and judgement from food and the person eating it (Nuton, 2022). It helps students learn to trust their bodies and make food choices that align with their individual preferences and nutritional needs without the influence of diet culture.

A food neutral approach:

- Supports a positive relationship with food
- Supports autonomy and awareness of following natural hunger cues
- Promotes a positive relationship with the body, self-esteem, confidence and resilience which can foster mental well-being
- Contributes to the development of age-appropriate skills
- Lowers likelihood of developing eating disorders

Watch this video to learn more about [Food Neutrality in Schools](#).

## Practicing Food Neutrality

### 1. *Reflect on Your Biases:*

We all have biases. The way that we learned about and experienced food ourselves influences the way we teach and talk about food as adults. It's common in our current diet culture to struggle with accepting and enjoying all foods. When talking about food, it's important to try our best to avoid transferring our personal biases to students.

For prompts to evaluate your biases, visit [Canada's Food Guide Toolkit for Educators](#).

## 2. *Change Your Language:*

Remove labels and nicknames from foods and call food by its name. For example, candy is not 'junk' food or 'bad', its candy, and an apple is not 'healthy', or 'good' its an apple. Use descriptive words such as 'crunchy', 'sour', and 'round'.

## 3. *Create a Supportive Nutrition Environment:*

- Review our [10 Tips to Create a Supportive Food Environment](#) at school.
- Support an '*all foods fit*' environment where individual choices are respected.
- Eat together. Celebrate how food connects us.
- Separate food choices from body image, self-worth, and appearance. Support body diversity by showing different types of bodies in books, articles, videos, and emphasize that all bodies are good bodies. Provide compliments on students' qualities unrelated to physical appearance.
- Follow your feeding role as part of the Division of Responsibility (Satter, n.d.). Schools decide when and where students eat. Learn more about roles in feeding here: [Elementary](#) or [Secondary](#).
- Allow students to choose what and how much they eat from their lunch.
- Keep meal and snack time conversation light and positive rather than talking about nutrition.
- Provide non-food rewards.

## Age-Appropriate Food and Nutrition Education

Nutrition is an abstract concept. Nutrients in food are things we cannot see, and understanding how invisible parts of food may impact our body requires the ability to think abstractly. Children, especially those twelve and under, are concrete thinkers and will have difficulty understanding these abstract concepts (Cruz, 2020). Furthermore, children and youth make food decisions based on taste, preference, and familiarity; therefore, learning about the health benefits of eating certain foods is not likely to impact food decisions (Cook, 2007; Frerich et al., 2016).

The way we talk and teach about food grows with the child. For example, students build food literacy skills over time, progressing from basic food skills to more complex tasks such as adapting recipes and planning meals. Below are some age-appropriate nutrition education suggestions that use a food neutral lens. Visit [Brightbites.ca](#) for grade specific curriculum resources to teach about food and nutrition using a food neutral and body inclusive approach.

### **Age 3-7**

- Focus on food exploration:
  - Provide students with the opportunity to explore diverse foods to increase their willingness to try new foods. Children are more likely to eat familiar foods.
  - Learn about, read, and play with a variety of foods in a fun, pressure-free environment. Try painting with veggies and fruit, making art with pasta, or playing 'guess the food' games using the senses.
- Build students' food literacy. Get students involved in gardening, cooking, and composting.

## Age 8-11

- Continue to provide food exploration opportunities and encourage the development of food skills.
- Can start to discuss the different food groupings in Canada's Food Guide but avoid connecting them to health. Check out the resource section for lesson plans and classroom activities. Help students learn to listen to their body's cues of hunger and fullness if appropriate.

## Age 12-19

- Nutrition concepts can be taught in adolescence in a neutral way, without the influence of diet culture or villainizing specific foods or nutrients. For example:
  - Brainstorm how to make a balanced meal or snack using a variety of foods. Teens will start to take on more responsibility related to food decisions, such as packing their lunches or helping with meal planning.
  - Explore the cultural aspects of food and build media literacy skills as it relates to the food industry and diet culture messaging. It can be helpful to use an additive approach, such as what can we add to our meal/snack to help feel satisfied.

## Resources

Resources To Support Teaching	
Source Type	Link
Educator Resource	<a href="#">Promoting Positive Body Image Northwestern Health Unit</a>
Elementary Educator Toolkit	<a href="#">Teach Food First (Healthy Schools BC)</a>
Elementary Educator Toolkit	<a href="#">Canada's Food Guide</a>
Lesson plans, classroom activities, and resources	<a href="#">BrightBites.ca</a>
	<a href="#">Nuton.ca</a>
	<a href="#">Dairy Farmers of Canada Teach Nutrition</a>
	<a href="#">Nutrition Education Consulting</a> *some resources are available for a small fee
Elementary educator resources (Ontario curriculum)	<a href="#">Dietitians 4 Teachers</a> <a href="#">Poster series and parent letters</a>
Brochure and Posters	<a href="#">Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba Weight Stigma and Food Neutrality Resources</a>
Resource to help adults create a supportive food environment at school	<a href="#">Practical Guide: Lunchtime Food Allies - BrightBitesBrightBites</a>

Professional Development Resources	
Podcast	<a href="#">Teacher Fan Club Weight Neutral Well-being Series</a>
Podcast	<a href="#">Thames Valley District School Board Kurious in Kindergarten Podcast: Food Neutrality in Early Years</a>
E-module	<a href="#">Alberta Health Services Words Matter Recording (2022)</a>
Resource	<a href="#">Overview of Disordered Eating Prevention: How Schools Can Help</a>

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