



Positive Relationships with Food

FOUR WEEKS OF EASY ACTIVITIES FOR ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TO PRACTICE MENTAL HEALTH SKILLS WITHIN THEIR CLASSROOMS.

Week 1: Exploring foods together

Week 2: Sharing cultures and traditions through food

Week 3: Eating mindfully

Week 4: Gardening and cooking together

INTRODUCTION

This month's mental health activity series topic will help schools and teachers to foster eating competence and a positive relationship with food for their students and the school community while helping to protect against disordered eating behaviours.

In 2019, 49% of youth ages 12-17 in the Southwestern Public Health region reported preoccupation with a desire to be thinner and 38.4% reported they changed their eating habits to manage weight in the last 12 months (Public Health Ontario, 2024). Dieting through food restriction is one of the strongest risk factors for the development of an eating disorder; students who diet at a moderate level are five times more likely to develop an eating disorder than those who did not diet (Patten et al, 1999; Haines and Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). Well-intended messages about "healthy eating" can inadvertently cause harm by leading to preoccupation and fear of food that sends students down a path of dieting and disordered eating (O'Dea, 2000; Pinhas et al, 2013).

Food is so much more than nutrients; it provides us with joy, creates opportunity for connection and allows us to share our traditions with others (Satter, 2022). Being positive, comfortable, and flexible with eating, learning to accept a variety of foods, listening to body cues of hunger and fullness and developing the food skills needed to prepare meals over time are all part of being a competent eater (Satter, 2007). Eating competence is linked to better health outcomes (Satter, 2007).

The way we talk, teach, learn, and explore food in school can be done using a protective approach to help prevent disordered eating and support eating competence and the development of lifelong a positive relationship with food (Pinhas et al, 2013; Welch and Leahy, 2018; ESI 2016). Review [BrightBites.ca](https://www.brightbites.ca), [10 Ways to Create a Supportive Food Environment in Schools](#) to learn more. The [Teacher's Fanclub Podcast Challenging Diet Culture series](#) and [Words Matter training by Alberta Health Services](#) are also great resources for learning about supportive food environments and the impact of weight bias. Try this month's activities to help students and the school community enjoy and celebrate all foods!

KEY POINTS

- All foods fit and can be enjoyed fully. There are no good or bad foods. Having a positive relationship with food means being comfortable eating a variety of foods that support both nutrition and enjoyment.
- Food helps us to connect and learn about other cultures. Using our five senses when eating can make the experience more enjoyable and help keep us present.
- Growing, cooking, and enjoying food with others is important and helps maintain our mental health.



Weekly Announcements (Mental Health Monday)

Week One Announcement:

Did you know that all food can be enjoyed? Food gives us energy and helps us grow. It can also be a big part of celebrating special times, and helps us to connect with others while sharing our food cultures, and traditions. Can you think of foods that you've seen others eat that you'd like to try?

Week Two Announcement:

Food can be an important way to share our culture and traditions with others. Think of a special event or celebration you attended recently; what types of food did you eat? Who prepared the meal and who did you eat it with? Was the food presented in a unique way? What smells or sounds do you remember?

Week Three Announcement:

Have you heard of eating mindfully? It allows us to tune in to our food using our 5 senses. When you take a bite of your lunch today, use all your senses to enjoy it! What does the food look like, smell like, feel like, and taste like? What sound does it make when you crunch it or bite it? Eating with curiosity and using our senses when we eat can change the way we experience food and may even make food taste different!

Week Four Announcement:

Have you ever helped prepare or cook a meal or snack at home? Have you tried growing a vegetable plant like a tomato or bean? Growing and cooking food can help us connect with others and with nature. It can also help to relieve our stress or calm us down. So next time someone in your home is cooking or preparing food, jump in and offer to help!



ACTIVITIES

• Exploring foods together:

- Have a no-pressure food exposure day and let students explore and taste different foods at their own pace. Try foods like kiwi, dragonfruit, kefir, or snow peas that they might not have eaten before. Try modelling a growth mindset if a student doesn't like a food sampled "yet", because learning to like new foods takes time.
- Today I tasted resource: student activity sheet for trying and tasting food.

• Share Food Culture and Traditions and Eating with Others:

- Special Meal Event Menu [Grades 6-8]: Plan a menu for a special event while keeping food traditions in mind
- Explore other factors that make a meal enjoyable:
 - The People I Like to Eat With [Grades K-2]
 - Favourite Food or Meal Experience [Grades 6-8]

• Eating Mindfully

- A Guided Practice in Mindful Eating: Help students use all their senses to explore food by leading them through a mindful eating exercise [all grades]
- This article on Mindful Eating in the Classroom also provides ideas on how you can help students of all ages be more mindful when eating [Grades 4 – 6]

• Garden and Cook Together

- The more we get hands-on exposure to foods the better! Growing and preparing food can help to foster mental well-being by building confidence and self-esteem.
- Simple recipes to try in your classroom:
 - Simple yogurt sundae
 - Trail Mix
 - Hummus
- Offer students the opportunity to plant, grow, and care for a vegetable in the classroom: Try making salsa with plants you grow in the classroom (Grow It In the Classroom Activity)



Book and/or Video Recommendations

- **Explore cultural food traditions:**

- Bilal Cooks Dahl by Anoosha Syed [Grades K-3]
- Fry Bread by Kevin Noble Maillard [Grades K-2]

- **Learn about the joy of sharing and cooking food together:**

- Our Table by Peter H. Reynolds [Grades K-3]
- What's Cooking at 10 Garden Street by Felicita Sala [Grades K-3]
- Phoebe G Green series by Veera Hiranandani and Christine Almeda [Grades 2-4]
- Rutabaga the Adventure Chef series by Eric Colossal [Grades 3-6]

- **Have fun with food:**

- Dragons Love Tacos by Adam Rubin [Grades K- 2]
- Monsters Don't Eat Broccoli by Barbara Jean Hicks [Grades K-2]
- The Hunger Heroes by Jarrett Lerner [Grades 2-5]

- **Learn about eating mindfully:**

- No Ordinary Apple by Sara Marlowe [Grades K – 2]



For Educators Who Use Social Media

- Post photos or recipe cards for recipes shared by students representing their different culture for other families to try.
- Post photos of your students making and tasting the foods in the suggested activities section with their comments. \
- Post a weekly update on the growth of your class's vegetable growing project.

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