



Dear Principal/Administrator,

Thank you for your efforts to ensure a healthy learning environment for each of your students. Because we know that the well-being of your student population is a top priority for you, we would like to bring the following issue to your awareness.

During the school day, the subject of nutrition comes up directly at meal and snack times, as well as more subtly, such as during reading or math lessons which involve food. Lunch and snack times can be stressful for children who are hesitant eaters. It is of utmost importance that any time food is a subject, it is presented or addressed in a positive way.

Different children come in different bodies with different needs. They also come from families with different means as well as different dynamics. During meal times, a child's innate biological cues must be respected. That may mean that she finishes all of the food in her lunchbox, or it may mean that she takes a few bites and is satisfied. It may mean that she eats something sweet before eating a savory item. But what it comes down to is that the lunch was packed by the parent, or provided by the school at the parent's discretion. Once the food is in front of the child, she is in charge of whether she eats it and how much of it she eats. When a child says she is full, that must be honored.

Oftentimes, a well-meaning teacher will intervene by commenting on portion size or food choice. Although they may intend to bring awareness, even mindfulness, to the act of eating, the child feels chastened. This affects the child's appetite and may influence his long-term relationship with food. Over time, this child may start to view food as a source of shame.

As a school administrator, you are a powerful person in a child's life. There are many ways by which you can help encourage a healthy relationship with food, some of which include providing an environment that is conducive to proper nourishment and a positive atmosphere. You can arrange for the timing of meals to be consistent and long enough to allow children to enjoy their food and feel satisfied. You can also educate your staff to ensure that certain comments and actions are strictly avoided, such as the following:

- Discussions:
  - Portion size
  - Body size
  - Nutrition profiles of individual foods (or labeling foods as "good" or "bad")
  - Dieting (even between faculty members, when within earshot of children)
  - Nutrition education is very specific to age group. Any nutrition-focused curriculum should be developed with the assistance of a specialist in pediatric nutrition

- Actions:
  - Confiscating food: if the parent sent it, it is an acceptable food for that child. Intervening is undermining the parent's rights.
  - Instructing a child about how much to eat from his or her own meal, or running contests encouraging children to "clean their plates"
  - Routinely using food as a reward
  - Doing anything that shames a child about his or her food, appetite, or body type

There will likely be a situation where you or your faculty are concerned with the health and nutrition of a child in your school. This is an issue that is best discussed with the parent and handled by the appropriate health professional. **These concerns should never be addressed between teacher and child, but rather between administrator and parent.**

We have mentioned a "healthy relationship with food", but what exactly does that mean? Each meal is an opportunity to demonstrate the neutrality of food by allowing the child to honor his or her own biological signals. Over the course of months and years, this will help the child develop into an adult who can eat in a relaxed and balanced way by listening to her body's signals. When we allow a child to respect her internal cues, we help her develop *eating competence*. This is a term coined by registered dietitian Ellyn Satter and refers to a way of relating to food that is associated with more nutritious eating, healthier weights, better medical profiles, and positive attitudes about eating. This means reduced incidences of negative body image, unhealthy weight control behaviors, and eating disorders. It has become starkly evident that we do far more harm than good by teaching children to override their internal cues and listen to external signals instead.

You are critically positioned to help your students develop into successful adults who are healthy both inside and out. We are confident that you can use your influence to establish an environment in your school that will best support your students in nourishing their bodies and minds. Please reach out to us if we can be of help to you in any way.

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# OPTIMIZING HEALTHY EATING HABITS IN THE CLASSROOM



- **WHAT** food to pack - Parent's job
- **WHEN & WHERE** kids eat - Teacher's job
- **WHETHER & HOW MUCH** to eat - Child's job



## What Teachers Need to Know



### CHILDREN HAVE INNATE HUNGER & SATIETY CUES - HELP PRESERVE & PROTECT THEM

- Allow children to self-regulate their intake ➤ Don't specify a certain number of bites.
- Don't require one food to be finished before another is allowed.
- Believe and respect children when they say or signal that they are full.



### TEACH NUTRITION IN A POSITIVE WAY

- Avoid negative/fear-based statements like "X food is not healthy." Different families define "healthy food" differently, and different children have different health needs.
- Never confiscate food from a child because you believe it is unhealthy (barring allergies). Children need to trust that their parents can feed them properly. If you take a food away from a child, you are undermining the parent in the eyes of the child. Speak to the parent without the child's knowledge.

### PROVIDE STRUCTURE AROUND MEALS & SNACK TIMES

- Have set meal and snack times.
- Avoid grazing.

### DON'T TALK ABOUT DIETING IN FRONT OF CHILDREN

- The American Academy of Pediatrics discourages any form of diet talk with all children.
- Encourage body positivity & body diversity. (It is normal for people to come in all shapes and sizes!)
- Encourage exercise for the sake of health and pleasure - not weight control.
- Older grades - do not use dieting as an example of self-control or morality.



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