

The Healthy

Respectful Lunchroom



A discussion guide for teachers and educators - Grades 1-3

About this Topic

“Healthy eating” and food education are included in curriculum in Ontario and across Canada, but they are rarely defined well. Many of us have been taught to think about “healthy” only as it relates to nutrients. People have questions. What is in food? Which are “good” and “bad” foods? How much should we eat? These are the topics that are typically focused on in school.

What if “healthy” meant just a little bit more? At Good in Every Grain, we believe that “healthy” means more than the nutrients in our foods. We know that healthy eating includes our relationship with food, our food skills, our connection with our families and culture, and our understanding and appreciation of where our food comes from.

We are excited to offer an education session for your classrooms that reminds us all to celebrate and respect our foods, ourselves and our classmates, and educators while eating at school.

About this Guide

This guide provides discussion questions to deepen the learning from the videos or the live session with the dietitian. These questions can be used with your class as you pause the video or after the fact as an extension activity.

Developed in Partnership



Gwen Kostal is an Ontario dietitian who runs Dietitians 4 Teachers! With over a decade of child and family nutrition experience, Gwen is passionate about supporting teachers and educators to make their classrooms and food lessons fun, educational and safe. Educators, you can help students love exploring food with the same passion that you teach them to love reading, and you can help students have positive and safe relationships with food.



Good in Every Grain wants to help educators teach students where their food comes from. A majority of teachers surveyed – 92 per cent – said that schools should teach agriculture. And we agree! Our FREE resources use real-life agriculture topics and fun approaches to help you teach problem-solving, critical thinking, STEM skills and connections, life systems, sustainability, and more!



Discussion Topics for Educators to use with Students

What do you call food breaks at your school? When are they? How many do you have? How do they work?

Background: Making sure that students know what to expect around eating and meal times away from home is really important for supporting self-regulation. A student who thinks they only get one chance to eat may feel the need to eat beyond their fullness cues. Just like adults, some students are hungrier at certain times of the day, so knowing when the next eating occasion is expected can help students choose which and how much food to eat. When students and adults are on the same page with the schedule, the conversation in the lunchroom can shift from “Eat more! You’ll be hungry” to “Have you checked in with your body? The next time we will eat will be after we go to the library.”

What does your lunch box look like? How many different colours do we have in our class?

Background: This discussion is meant to be fun and establish the class norm that we are all different with different preferences. Talking about lunch boxes is a more neutral entry point than jumping right to the food that we eat.

Looking for a cross-curricular opportunity? Try a graphing exercise with your class? How many different colours or patterns of lunch boxes are there?

Graph if students have solid colours or patterns, zippers or velcro etc. For art, you could have students colour in a template of a lunch box on a drawing page (see the activity book).



Can you remember a time you had something surprising or special in your lunch box? What was it? How did it make you feel?

Background: Focusing on positive aspects of food and eating is important for setting the food culture in your classroom. Many schools or educators have classroom policies that ask adults to exclude or include certain foods from the lunch box. These policies or preferences, while usually well-meaning, can confuse and sometimes harm students' relationships with food. They often reinforce a narrow definition of health (nutrients only) or encourage foods that are not culturally appropriate (i.e., not considering mixed meals such as a dumpling when giving instructions such as “eat your vegetables first.”)

This conversation is meant to normalize a wide variety of foods in students' lunch boxes and connect us to home. A muffin that a child helped make with a babysitter, or leftover food from a celebratory meal can contribute to well-being at school when children are away from their adults and families.

When we talk about food as fuel only, we miss the opportunity to normalize for students that food can be joyful and connect us to our family.



Who packs your lunch? What are some things your adults might be thinking about when they choose foods for your lunch?

Background: There are many reasons that foods end up in lunch boxes. Almost all lunches are packed with intention, and operating on the assumption that a parent or adult at home is choosing foods that work for their child is important.

Some of the reasons that foods may be in a lunch box:

- 1. Foods that give students energy:** Grains, fruits, dairy, and other foods containing carbohydrates are important for children at school. Vegetables are great, but they are not enough. Our efforts to ensure healthy eating often prioritize fruit and vegetables and adult-based messages have taught us that carbohydrate-based foods are “less than” but in fact, they are extremely important for students’ nutrition needs. Seeing breads, crackers, and other carbohydrate-containing foods in the lunch box is a good thing!
- 2. Preferences and accepted foods:** Students having foods that are familiar and that they like is important to support children eating away from home. School is not usually a time to explore new foods. Exposure to new foods is best done in a safe, calm environment with a responsive adult available to support and respond. Usually, new food exposure is best done at home. Sending children to school with foods they already like, that are culturally appropriate for their family, and that they are familiar with, is a good strategy to ensure they do eat during the school day.
- 3. Sensory needs:** It is easy to think that pre-packaged foods are “unhealthy,” but it is important to remember that all foods have nutrition, and eating is healthier than not eating. Children with challenges or preferences related to the taste, texture, and smell of foods do well with some pre-packaged or processed foods because they are consistent, reliable, and predictable.
- 4. Access:** Not all families have access to the same foods. Some families may live rurally and are not able to have daily access to grocery stores and may rely on canned or preserved foods. Some families may use food assistance programs that influence the frequency and variety of food availability. Families shop at different grocery stores due to budget, transportation, and what is nearby. In some areas, there are NO grocery stores. If a family does not have a car, they may be getting groceries less often and shopping at less conventional places like a convenience store for some food. This all means that the food that is available is different from family to family.
- 5. Food skills:** Not all students (or their adults) have the same cooking, food, and eating skills. A child’s skills in using utensils and containers, accessing executive functioning skills, and even the skill of recognizing hunger will be different from their peers. Adults and parents may choose food that they know works with their child’s readiness. While one student may be able to manage an insulated container for hot food, another student may find this overwhelming, leading to stress and possibly not eating.
- 6. Medical reasons:** Many children have medical situations that may influence food intake. Appetite may be low at school for some students, or they may get most of their nutrition at home. Foods sent to school may be favourite foods to encourage intake. Medical reasons may also dictate that a certain restriction is needed. If family food skills or financial resources are low, you may see foods that you would otherwise deem “unhealthy.” For example, oats are naturally gluten-free, and oat products are considered gluten-free when packaged in a gluten-free facility. If a family has a new diagnosis of celiac disease, a pre-packaged oat-based granola bar may be a great addition to the lunch box as they learn new food choices and cooking methods.



What are some things that we can do to stay calm at lunch time?

Background: The reality is that most schools have a limited amount of time for eating and food time at school. This time may only be 20 minutes and is also used for tasks such as washing hands, restroom breaks, and getting ready for outside time. This time can be depleted fast. This is also often a time when students are with adults different from their primary educators (volunteers, older students, or other educators popping in). Encouraging students to contribute to a calm environment can have much more impact than encouraging them to “eat their vegetables,” etc.

Some ideas for staying calm in class may be: listen to music, keep voices quiet, have our desks tidy before the lunch bell, have our lunch boxes ready to go so we aren’t rushing, and limiting distractions such as videos.

A note about videos in class: Playing videos in lunchrooms has been an important tool used throughout classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic to help limit movement and talking when masks were off.

As we collectively see COVID-19 protocols adjust, we need to consider that movies or shows in classrooms may not work well for many students by preventing eating due to distraction and multitasking. This may leave students feeling surprised when the lunch bell rings, and they haven’t eaten much. If you use videos in your class make sure you pay attention to how the students in your class respond.

Can you remember a time you saw a food for the very first time? Do you remember what it smelled like? What did it look like?

Background: Students talk about each other’s lunches. They will notice the differences. Giving students the language to be respectful and curious in the classroom is important to your safe food culture. Eating at school is very different from home. At home, children are surrounded by foods they are familiar with, at school they are likely to be exposed to lots of new foods.

Making the experience of seeing something new a positive light is important. This skill is something they can use for so many situations in their lives (i.e., seeing someone with a mobility device they have not seen before, a new hairstyle, or a type of clothing that is unfamiliar). The goal of this skill is to teach students to say/think “that is new to me. I wonder what it is? I wonder how I could learn about that?” instead of just “eww, yuck, gross” when something is different.

This is a skill that will need to be practised and modelled. It is great for a class-ground rule.



How does your body tell you that you are hungry? What does it feel like?

Background: *Note: This is more complicated than you might think. Many students can tune into hunger, but not all have access to this skill. You may have students in your classroom that rely on the structure and suggestions (from parents and family members) around when and what to eat. Checking in with families about what will work best for students that need more structure is a great way to offer support.*

Responding to and tolerating hunger are skills most often taught and reinforced at home, but it is a really important skill for students at school because of the structure of school days. One of the best ways for an educator to reinforce this skill is to model it. “Gee, that walk was fun! My body is telling me I am thirsty. I can feel my mouth is a bit dry, I am going to have a bit of water” or “Hmm. I can feel my belly growling – let’s check our schedule for when we get to eat next. I hope it is soon!” This may feel silly, but modelling this behaviour may save you from having to teach a lesson on the topic.

Some signs of hunger that students may identify: growling tummy, feeling sleepy, thinking about food, feeling grumpy, sad or agitated.



Teaching Food Literacy (and adding new interest to your lessons)

Food literacy has a place in the classroom. It is not just about nutrition or cooking. Certainly, understanding food means learning skills and information that support choices about health and skills for turning ingredients into nutrition. It is also about intersections with other topics – science, technology, math, diversity, social studies, history, and climate change – as we discover where food comes from.

At its most elemental, food literacy is about eating and cooking. Eating connects us to culture and diversity. It is affected by food security and social justice. It is also a gateway to many other topics; consider cooking, which is ultimately an exercise in math and chemical reactions.

From a curriculum perspective, food literacy is a gateway to Ontario’s curriculum, including but not limited to the following:

- **STEM Skills:** modern farm equipment is highly technical, involving satellites, artificial intelligence, and coding
- **Life Systems:** the physical characteristics of plants and their needs for air, water, light, heat, nutrients and space, biodiversity, micro-organisms, and the importance of soil
- **Earth and Space Systems:** the impact of human activities such as agriculture, on air and water, viewed from various perspectives including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit
- **Social Studies:** humans’ roles, relationships, and responsibilities including the roles of farmers and their efforts at mitigating climate change; the relationships of people with the natural and built environments; the exploration of traditions within communities; how climate relates to the food we eat; changes throughout history in the ways people get food

Food as a subject offers a relevant way to access other subjects. It is a singular unifying element – everyone eats – that can help us learn much more than how to eat.



Talking about gluten-free or other diets

Students will hear about diets that restrict some elements – carbohydrates, fat, or a specific nutrient, like the protein found in barley, wheat, and rye: gluten. IF you find this topic comes up in your classroom, it is important not to criticize their adults. Acknowledge that people eat differently and some people can not eat some foods. Some people can not eat gluten; but many can. It is in many foods that help children grow and develop.



Talking about eating local with students

Ontario's farmers grow lots of great foods, including the grains that are so important for a healthy diet. They are also ingredients in many culturally diverse foods. Buying locally grown food is important. It is not just about freshness – it is about how the food gets to us and how much energy is used for that. Less transportation of our foods is good for everyone.

Do your students know about soybeans?

Soybeans are a great grain! They are used in many foods and other products that you may not even know about. Have you tried tofu? Yes – soybeans! Do you eat mayonnaise? It can be made with soybeans. You can grow soybeans right in your classroom with our free What's Growing ON? seed kits. Request your kit here: www.GoodinEveryGrain.ca/whats-growing-on/



Additional Learning and Reading:

Here are some of our ag-education partners and other agriculture organizations that have classroom resources.

- AgScape; www.agscape.ca/
- Dietitians 4 Teachers; www.dietitians4teachers.ca/
- FANLit; www.fanlit.org/
- FarmFood360; www.farmfood360.ca/
- Good in Every Grain; www.goodineverygrain.ca/



We're Good in Every Classroom!

Join the Ontario teachers who have discovered our resources.



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