

Health Promotion in Schools

How to help your students develop a healthy relationship with food, exercise, and their bodies.

***Why?** 1 in 5 teens may struggle with disordered eating behaviors, many of which involve restrictive eating behaviors. 77% of adolescents don't feel comfortable in their own skin. Developing a health curriculum that is neutral towards food and bodies can help students create a healthy relationship with food and body image during their formative years, while supporting them in building lifelong health behaviors.*

Instead of...

Try...

Labeling foods as good or bad.

Using terms like "junk food" or labeling things as unhealthy" or "bad for you" can cause guilt and secrecy around food, and can contribute to binary ("all-or-nothing") thinking about food..

Using neutral language about food.

Explain how some foods can help our bodies grow strong, while other foods are fun but not essential. Encourage eating all kinds of foods, including trying new foods as your taste buds change as you grow up.

Promoting calorie counting or dieting.

Teaching food logging, calorie counting, or label reading can lead to rigid or restrictive behaviors around food intake.

Focus on nutritional balance and variety.

Emphasize that all foods provide different types and amounts of nutritional value. Discuss the value in meals having different components (and colors).

Tying food to appearance.

Associating certain foods with body parts (i.e. "this is going straight to your hips") or body shapes (i.e "fat") is inaccurate and unhelpful.

Discuss food as fuel for the body and brain.

In an age appropriate way, emphasize the biological benefits of food including food as fuel and the individual contributions of each nutrient type.

Commenting on weight or body shape.

Weighing students, measuring body fat percentage, calculating BMI, or engaging in other body measurements in schools has not been shown to have benefit, and can cause emotional harm. Terms such as "overweight", "obese", "underweight" can feel isolating to those with certain body types.

Promoting body diversity.

Consider representation of all body types in lessons and media. Discuss influence of genetics on body size and appearance. Discuss lack of representation of various body types in media and culture .

Using food as a reward or punishment.

Food incentives can unintentionally encourage emotional eating and food power struggles.

Offering non-food rewards.

Consider rewarding with extra privileges, activities, tangible items, or recognition.

Showing "shock" videos about food, exercise or bodies.

These videos can lead to fear based behaviors around food, exercise, and body image.

Showing videos and media about how the body works, and about how nutrition can optimize physical functioning.

Screen videos for neutral language and science-based information

Setting rigid minimums for daily exercise or discuss exercise as a way burn calories, or to change body parts or shape.

Recommending "60 minutes of exercise" can unintentionally encourage obsessive or unhealthy attitudes toward physical activity and discourage students from listening to their body's signals.

Encouraging students to find forms of movement that they enjoy, to engage in movement most days, and to listen to their bodies regarding rest and injury prevention.

Focus on the physical and mental health benefits of movement, and the benefit of finding movement that is enjoyable.