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Make the Healthy Food Choice the Easy Food Choice at Play and at School

Children and youth spend hours at school, recreation centres, sports fields and arenas. These spaces and places play an important role in their nutrition and health so it's important to think about the food and beverages available there. We can think of these foods as 'everyday' and 'sometimes' foods.

'Everyday foods' are the healthiest choices, suggested as those to choose most often. They include plain water for thirst and food such as vegetables, fruit, whole grains, milk and alternative products lower in fat and added sugars, and lean meats and alternatives, lower in sodium such as legumes, nuts and eggs.

According to local statistics from the 2011 Canadian Community Health Survey, about one third of youth aged 12 to 19 years in Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District reported eating five or more servings of vegetables and fruits each day. If their everyday places provided more everyday foods like vegetables and fruit and less 'sometimes' foods like chips, chocolates and pop it would go a long way to improve lifelong health potential. Keep reading for ideas that could make the healthy food choice the easy choice at play and at school.

Making healthier choices is tough on everyone. Adults can make up to 200 eating decisions each day! It's not any easier for hungry or thirsty children and youth to make a healthier food decision when faced with community and school vending machines that offer only 'sometimes foods' usually higher in added salt, sugar and fat. Data from the 2009 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey indicated that only one out of three grade 7 to 12 students reported drinking soda pop or sports drinks once or not at all in the previous seven days. Those in control of stocking vending machines, snack counters and tuck shops can meet with food suppliers, parents, administrators and Registered Dietitians to find nutritious, tasty, safe and affordable products. Discussions could include the potential to install or increase the number of water fountains.

Sports events that wrap up with ‘sometimes’ foods like cookies and freezies make it difficult for children and youth to absorb and believe the lesson that healthy eating leads to healthy bodies and minds. When short on time it is easier to pick up prepared foods, often higher in added sugars, salt and fat. Try sharing the load when planning for healthy snacks at community or school-based sporting events.

Much of the food advertising we see is for highly processed foods. At home, at the grocery store, at school - encourage youth to question what they see in food marketing. Discuss why the healthier choices don’t receive the same attention.

An additional way to assess children’s and youth’s food places is to consider that food need not be included in all of their everyday activities. For example using food as a reward for a job well done can begin to get food tied to mood and self-worth. Reward instead with special class or individual privileges such as an extra recess, dancing in class, making deliveries to the office, getting extra art or reading time. Another example to separate out the food connection would be to use non-food items for community or school-based fundraising. Promote literacy with book fairs, plan a flea market or sports equipment sale, charge a small admission fee to a school dance, raise funds at a ‘teachers versus students’ or ‘coaches/referees versus players’ sports game or hold a car wash to promote spirit and physical activity.

“Community and sports volunteers, families, health care providers and schools can work together to make everyday food choices outside the home the normal way to go”, says Marie Traynor, Public Health Nutritionist. “We can role model healthy eating and work towards creating spaces and places that support it.”

For more information contact the Leeds, Grenville, and Lanark District Health Unit’s Health Action Line at 1-800-660-5853 (613-345-5685) or visit our website at www.healthunit.org/nutrition