

Are You a Positive Role Model?

Making the case for positive role modelling

When students see adults place importance on healthy food choices, they may also begin to see the importance of healthy eating. Elementary school teachers have a potentially greater influence on a child's health than any other person outside of the home.¹ They are trusted sources for nutrition and dietary choices.² Therefore, if children see teachers eating or drinking nutritionally poor choices, or dieting because they are unhappy with their bodies, they receive a mixed message from one of their major influencers. Teachers, parent volunteers and other adults who are in schools (eg, secretaries, custodians and educational assistants) can contribute to a Healthy School Nutrition Environment by role modelling healthy eating behaviours.

What is positive role modelling?

Positive role modelling is a demonstration of healthy eating behaviours and positive body image by school staff and parent volunteers in the presence of students. This demonstration actively promotes healthy foods and beverages as part of an enjoyable and balanced diet that includes these healthy items more often.

Peer role models can also significantly affect a student's food selection, especially when the role model is similar to the observer (eg, a classmate), or is seen as particularly powerful (eg, a student in an older grade).³

Nutrition Tools for Schools

Benefits of positive role modelling

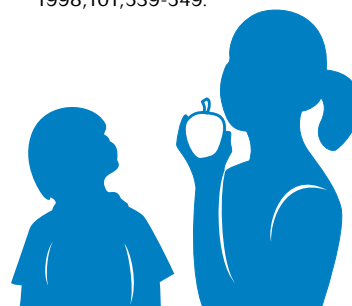
Positive role modelling of healthy eating and positive body image behaviours by all school community members:

- Reinforces the classroom healthy eating and body image education
- Encourages students to value and enjoy healthy eating
- Encourages students to accept and like themselves for the way they are now
- Promotes student preferences for healthy foods and beverages
- Links to the 'whole school approach' to creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment
- Shows parents and the local community that the school takes the health of its students seriously

¹Berenson, G. Arbeit, M. Hunter, S. Johnson, C. Nicklas, T. 1991. Cardiovascular Health Promotion for Elementary School Children: The Heart Smart Program. *Annals of New York Academy of Science*, 623:299-313.

²Hanning, R. Jessup, L. May, 2002. Presentation handout on Reality Check: What Kids are Eating in Ontario. Dairy Farmers of Ontario Symposium, Canada.

³Birch L, Fisher J. October 31, 2006. Development of Eating Behaviours Among Children and Adolescents. *Pediatrics* 1998;101;539-549.



What kind of role model are you?

Success to share

The parents at Holy Spirit Ukrainian Catholic Elementary School in Hamilton, Ontario began a student nutrition program to provide fruit and vegetable snacks for all students on a daily basis. One parent commented that she had continuously tried to introduce nectarines into her family home and into the kids' lunches, yet it wasn't until all students were sharing nectarines at the same time that her kids started to ask for this specific fruit on a consistent basis. The positive role modelling of healthy snacks at the school has introduced this family and all students to new and fun fruits and vegetables that can be found in their lunches more often.

*Submitted by Lesia Hucal, Public Health Dietitian,
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What kind of role model are you?

The following activities help school staff and parent volunteers to explore and recognize ways that they can inhibit or promote healthy eating behaviours and positive body image among students. Answer the questions on your own.

The soul-searching questions in activity one and activity two have no right or wrong answers. Exploring your responses will offer valuable insight into how you may be influencing children's beliefs about healthy eating and healthy body image.

Activity One: What kind of role model are you with respect to healthy eating?

- Do you teach your students about the importance of eating a healthy breakfast, but skip breakfast yourself and sip on coffee throughout the morning?
- Do students see you eating nutritious foods?
- Do you eat or drink unhealthy choices when teaching?
- Do students see you drink milk or water instead of pop/coffee?
- Do you eat school meals? Drop by the breakfast program to chat with students?
- Do you encourage your students to bring in healthy snacks, but snack on doughnuts in the staff room?
- If you notice a student is hungry or comes to school without breakfast, do you refer him or her to the breakfast or snack program?
- Do you treat children who attend the breakfast or snack program differently?
- Do you share your food likes and dislikes (eg, not eating meat, only eating organic foods)?
- Do you reward students with non-food rewards such as stickers, erasers or pencils?
- How do you support your school's attempts to create a Healthy School Nutrition Environment?

What kind of role model are you?

Activity Two: What kind of role model are you with respect to body image and self-esteem?



- Have you inadvertently promoted a fear of being fat by your words and actions?
- Are your perceptions of body weight issues a barrier to teaching nutrition education?
- Do you refrain from talking about dieting in front of students?
- Do you comment on how you look or how much you weigh?

When children hear adults expressing dissatisfaction with their bodies, they may begin to believe that being an adult means being unhappy or concerned with one's body. When they hear adults criticizing or admiring the bodies of others, they may copy this behaviour by teasing other children about their bodies. You can support your students in accepting and loving their bodies, even when you aren't teaching nutrition!

- Am I dissatisfied with my body size and shape?
- Do I talk about my unhappiness with my body? Whom do I talk to and who might overhear what I have to say?
- Am I always going on a diet or coming off a diet? Who knows when I'm on a diet and how do they know?

- Do I feel guilty when I eat certain foods? Do I refuse to eat certain foods while commenting that I am dieting to lose weight? Do I emphasize 'bad' foods versus 'good' foods?
- Why do I think children or adults become overweight?
- What do I think when I see an overweight child or adult? Do I tend to pay less attention to overweight children in my classroom? Do I give overweight parents the same amount of time and attention as I do parents who are not overweight?
- How do I intervene when I observe teasing of an overweight child by other children?
- Have I ever been surprised when an overweight child, who I thought was not very bright, got a high grade on a standardized test? Has a parent ever complained that I was treating an overweight child unfairly in some way?

Adapted from 'Am I Fat? Helping Young Children Accept Differences in Body Size' Joanne Ikeda, Priscilla Naworski, ETR Associates, 1992.

If you are concerned about some of your answers to the above questions, contact your local public health unit/department to speak to a health professional who is knowledgeable about healthy eating, body image and self-esteem issues.

Does your school have a Healthy School Nutrition Environment?

A Healthy School Nutrition Environment exists when a school promotes healthy eating through words *and* actions. Students get the same message about food, nutrition and healthy eating wherever food is served – in the classroom, in the school and at home. The following nine Essential Elements¹ are recommended for a school to have a healthy nutrition environment.

Whole School Approach	Essential Elements
In the School	<p>Does your school offer healthy, reasonably priced and culturally-appropriate food choices? For example does your school have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healthy fundraising? • a school milk program? • a healthy tuck shop? • healthy 'special food' days? • non-food rewards in the classroom? • healthy classroom celebrations? • healthy refreshments at school meetings and events?
	Do parents, teachers and volunteers role model healthy eating and body image behaviours at school?
	Does your school have a Student Nutrition Program (eg, breakfast, snack and lunch)?
	Does your school practise safe food practices and have an allergy-safe environment?
	Are nutrition breaks at school appropriately scheduled?
	Does your school have a food and nutrition policy?
	In the Classroom
Do teachers have up-to-date nutrition resources to support the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum?	
In Homes and In the Community	Does your school provide student, parent and community education about healthy eating?

¹ Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health School Nutrition Workgroup. 2004 *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.

Need more information?

Public health offers *Nutrition Tools for Schools - a toolkit for elementary schools*. Whether you're a teacher, parent, school administrator or volunteer, this toolkit will lead you through a step-by-step process to creating a healthy nutrition environment in your school. *Nutrition Tools for Schools* contains a variety of resources and tools to implement the nine Essential Elements listed above. For more information about this toolkit, please contact your public health unit/department.

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