

# Nutrition, Children and the School Environment

## Why is good nutrition important for children?

Nutrition plays a key role in healthy child development. Well-nourished children are more likely to get the energy and essential nutrients they need to grow, be active, stay healthy and do well at school. Healthy eating habits formed in childhood will help children to grow into healthy adults.

## What is the impact of children's eating habits on health and school performance?

Children who eat well are healthier. In the school, healthier children tend to be better learners. Studies show that well-nourished children have:

- Decreased lateness and absenteeism
- Improved behaviour
- Less anxiety
- More effective coping skills
- Increased alertness<sup>1</sup>



## Nutrition Tools for Schools

Unfortunately, today, too many children have unhealthy eating patterns which affect their well-being now and for the future. Nutrition surveys in Canada<sup>2,3,4</sup>, show that children are:

- Filling up on foods and beverages with poor nutritional value, such as soft drinks and french fries
- Eating too many calories from high-fat, unhealthy fat, salty and/or sugary foods
- Not meeting the minimum number of recommended servings of the basic four food groups, especially for Vegetables and Fruit and Milk and Alternatives
- Skipping breakfast, especially as they get older

Poor nutrition keeps children from doing well at school. They may:

- Be more likely to become sick and miss classes
- Have more behavioural and emotional problems
- Be less able to concentrate, solve problems and remember information
- Have lower test scores and be more irritable<sup>5,6</sup>

# Nutrition, Children and the School Environment (cont'd)

**Nutrition Tools  
for Schools**

Unhealthy eating habits play a part in the rising rates of childhood overweight and obesity, and Type 2 diabetes. Young children with poor eating habits tend to keep these habits as they age, increasing the risk of chronic diseases later in life such as cancer, stroke, osteoporosis, high blood pressure and heart disease.

## **Did you know?**

Poor eating habits can have lasting effects on children's learning and school performance.

## **What is the school's role in promoting healthy eating?**

Where children live, learn and play can make it easier or more difficult for them to be healthy and choose nutritious foods. When it comes to healthy eating habits, the influence of the school is second only to that of parents and the home environment.

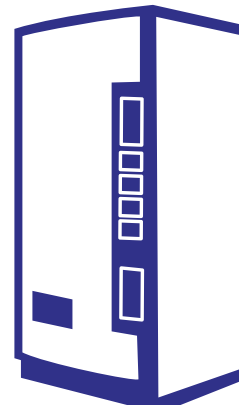
Not only do children learn about nutrition through the curriculum, but the school offers many chances as well to practise and reinforce healthy eating behaviours. Children get the most out of classroom learning when they also see positive messages about healthy eating throughout the school.



# Ways the school environment can have a positive influence

**Nutrition Tools  
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- Teachers are positive role models for children by making healthy food choices at school
- Healthy eating information for parents is regularly included in the school newsletter and/or is available on the school's website
- Families and community organizations take part in healthy eating programs and education through homework assignments and school events
- A School Nutrition Action Committee (SNAC) runs with support from parents, school staff, students, the principal or vice-principal, school volunteers and interested community members
- Policies guide the foods and beverages offered or sold at school (eg, ensuring only healthy choices are available)
- The 'Healthy Eating' expectations in the Health and Physical Education curriculum are taught in all grade levels. The local public health unit provides teacher training or curriculum support materials
- Non-food items (eg, stickers, pencils or other dollar store novelties) or non-material prizes (eg, playing a favourite game, acting as the teacher's assistant for the day) are used instead of food rewards for positive behaviour or doing well in school
- Healthy foods are offered for school parties and special events
- Raising money for the school uses ways other than selling chocolate or candy
- Healthy choices are offered in school tuck shops and vending machines



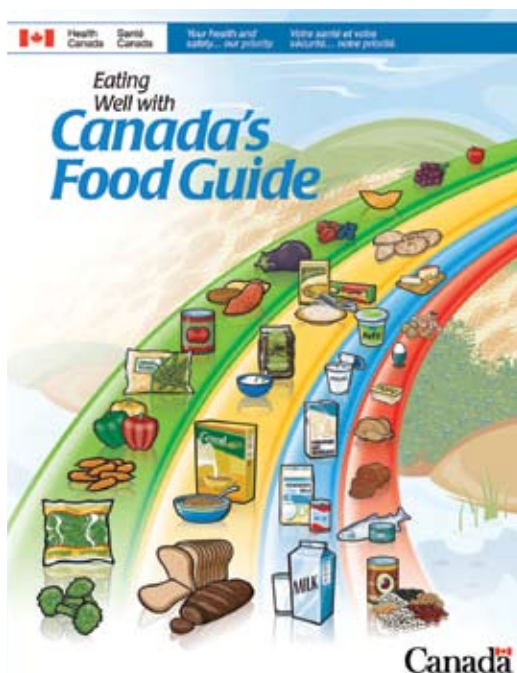
# Ways the school environment can have a positive influence

- A milk program is organized so that all students can enjoy fresh, cold milk with their lunch
- A Student Nutrition Program (breakfast, lunch or snack) is organized so that all students can access healthy food at school. Enlist the help of parents, grandparents and interested community members to help out with food shopping, preparation, serving and clean-up
- 'Special food' days, such as pizza lunches, include healthy choices and foods from at least three of the four food groups in *Canada's Food Guide*
- Safe and pleasant eating areas help students to enjoy their lunches
- Local farmers offer farm tours and information to students about how food is grown

**Nutrition Tools  
for Schools**



**The consequences of unhealthy eating practices during childhood cannot be overstated<sup>7</sup>. Schools are an ideal setting to influence children's eating habits.**



- <sup>1</sup> Pate, RR, Ross, JG. 1987. *Factors Associated With Health-related Fitness*. Journal of Physical Education and Recreation Dance. 58(9):93-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Breakfast for Learning-Canadian Living Foundation. 2006. *Report Card on Nutrition for School Children*. Accessed 15 October 06 at: [www.breakfastforlearning.ca/english/resources/index\\_report\\_card.html](http://www.breakfastforlearning.ca/english/resources/index_report_card.html)
- <sup>3</sup> King, AJC, Boyce, WF, King, MA. 1999. *Trends in the Health of Canadian Youth*. Ottawa: Health Canada.
- <sup>4</sup> Evers, S, Taylor, J, Manske, S, Midgett, C. 2001. *Eating and Smoking Behaviours of School Children in Southwestern Ontario and Charlottetown, PEI*. Canadian Journal of Public Health, 92(6):433-436.
- <sup>5</sup> Pollitt, E, Jacoby, ER. 1998. *Fasting and cognition in well- and undernourished school children: a review of three experimental studies*. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition: 67 (suppl): 779S-84S.
- <sup>6</sup> Tufts University Center on Hunger, Poverty & Nutrition Policy. 1994. *Statement on the link Between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children*. Tufts University, Metford, MA.
- <sup>7</sup> Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health School Nutrition Workgroup. 2004. *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.



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