



ALL FOODS CAN FIT

Food Neutrality: Are all foods equal? A Resource For Educators

We are all here to help children and youth thrive in all areas of life. However, what was once thought of as being helpful food and nutrition advice, is now known to be potentially harmful and oppressive. There is a lot to (un)learn about approaching food with children and youth. Feeling resistance to this process is completely normal. Please approach this resource with an open mind and consider your own privileges and biases. Unlearning diet culture takes practice, patience and self-compassion.

As educators, we are taught to teach about healthy lifestyles by promoting nutritious foods like vegetables, fruits, and whole grains while discouraging foods like candy, pop, and highly processed foods.

However, research is showing that by approaching food in a more neutral way, we can promote a healthier relationship with food that can have lasting positive outcomes (Satter, 2007). Neutral food exposure can lead to acceptance of a wider variety of foods over time.

What is food neutrality?

Teaching about food in a neutral way means teaching that all foods have the same moral value. No foods are inherently “good” or “bad” or “healthy” or “junk.” No food is valued over another (Tribole & Resch, 2020).

Of course, not all foods are nutritionally the same. Food neutrality is not about nutritional value, it’s about removing the moral judgments from the food itself and removing all judgment about oneself or others for eating it.

Consider how you can promote food neutrality in your classroom or child care setting:

AVOID JUDGING AND EVALUATING FOODS

When we judge and evaluate foods, we set children and youth up to have an unhealthy relationship with food which can result in unintended harmful consequences like secretive or restrictive eating for the fear of being ‘bad or unhealthy’ (Tribole & Resch, 2020). Judging foods can also erode trust with families and may unintentionally shame families who have limited access to certain foods.

All schools and/or child care settings have their own food culture, intentional or not. The food environment includes the meal and snack time routine, role modeling, curriculum, and what food is available and/or provided (e.g., canteen, vending machines, hot lunches, food from home etc.). This food environment can support or undermine a person’s eating.

THINGS THAT ARE HARMFUL:

- Grouping foods as healthy/junk, good/bad, green light/red light, every day or sometimes foods.
- Making negative comments about food.
- Teaching tools or lesson plans that demonize certain foods (e.g., placing sugar cubes in front of drinks to shock children and youth away from consuming them).
- Using fear or scare tactics to discourage someone from eating certain foods.

THINGS THAT ARE HELPFUL:

- Presenting all foods as acceptable or morally equal (e.g., experiential learning opportunities that explore a variety of foods).
- Calling foods by their names. Instead of ‘treat’ call it a ‘chocolate bar’.
- Describing foods in a simple and factual way based on things like colour, texture, flavour, etc.
- Focusing on what food does for our mind and body (i.e., apples AND chocolate bars serve a purpose).
- Role modeling flexible eating. Join children and youth at mealtime and enjoy a variety of foods based on hunger, satiety, nutrition, and pleasure.
- Following the Division of Responsibility.

AVOID FOOD PRESSURE

Food pressure can sometimes be subtle and may cause children and youth to place moral judgment on food. It can be a negative experience for children and youth causing them to dislike a food based on a negative association, or they may eat certain foods to please someone. It can also teach them to not listen to their bodies, ignoring their own preferences and hunger/fullness cues (Satter, 2022). The goal is not to get them to try foods, rather to experience a variety of foods using their senses.

THINGS THAT ARE HARMFUL:

- Encouraging children and youth to eat one food before another.
- Asking children and youth to finish their plates before getting dessert.
- Asking children and youth to eat X number of bites.
- Allowing/encouraging older children and youth to police others' meals.
- Praising and encouraging children and youth for eating or not eating (e.g., I am so proud of you!).
- Praising and encouraging children and youth when they have tried a new food or have eaten a certain food.

THINGS THAT ARE HELPFUL:

- Serve all foods together. Simply offer foods to allow for the children and youth to decide what they would like to eat and in what order.
- Describe a new food as juicy, sour or crunchy, if asked, and then allow them to decide if they want to try it or not.
- Allow children and youth to eat foods in whatever order they want, even if it means eating their cookie first.
- Allow children/youth to trust their internal cues of hunger and fullness.
- When possible, offer a wide range of foods and have them be involved in cooking to engage all of their senses in the process.

AVOID USING FOOD AS A REWARD

When food is provided as a reward, children and youth can become reliant on food to regulate their emotions and it can disconnect them from their fullness and hunger cues (Satter, 2022).

THINGS THAT ARE HARMFUL:

- Giving children and youth foods to make them feel better.
- Making food the reward for good behaviour, completion of tasks or activities.
- Making comments that makes someone feel lucky or special because they have a certain food. "Wow! You have chocolate cake in your lunch, your mom must really love you!"

THINGS THAT ARE HELPFUL:

- Approach food neutrally. Remember, all foods have the same moral value. No food is valued over another.
- Replace food rewards with non-food related rewards (e.g., longer recess, music, a dance party).
- When they try a new food, either avoid commenting all together or remain neutral by saying "I see you tried it, what did you think about it?" Ask them to describe the various textures and taste.

AVOID RESTRICTING FOODS

Restriction can create feelings of shame and guilt linked to those foods and can hinder people's relationship with food. It undermines the body's natural ability to regulate hunger and fullness cues (Satter, 2007).

THINGS THAT ARE HARMFUL:

- Creating rules around what caregivers/families should or shouldn't pack for lunches/snacks or forbids certain foods/beverages in the facility (i.e., policing foods).
- Taking food out of a child's lunch and not letting them eat it.
- Telling children and youth their caregivers shouldn't have sent XYZ food (unless the food is not allowed due to allergies).

THINGS THAT ARE HELPFUL:

- Providing a safe and quiet mealtime environment with enough time to eat. If possible, free of distraction (i.e., positive eating environment).
- Providing opportunities for children and youth to explore a variety of foods.
- Trusting families to feed their children in the best way they can (i.e., allowing children/youth to eat what is sent from home, in what ever order they want).
- Providing a supplemental snack option for children and youth to add to lunches if requested or needed.
- Following the Division of Responsibility.

The Division of Responsibility is a way of feeding where adults are responsible for **what, when and where** food is served, and children and youth are responsible for **how much** or **whether** they choose to eat. If food comes from home, then families caregivers take on the role of 'what' food is served.

References:

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Tribole, E., & Resch, E. (2020). *Intuitive eating: A revolutionary program that works* (4th ed.). St. Martin's Griffin.

This resource does not aim to address food security but rather is intended to address nutrition and health beliefs.

Resource provided by the registered dietitians of the Manitoba Food Environments for Early Learning and Schools (MB FEELS) Committee.

Contact us for permission to modify this resource: MBFEELSCommittee@gmail.com