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Food in Schools - making the better choice

A guide for secondary schools about supporting students to make better decisions when it comes to choosing what to eat for lunch



The imperative

Habits

Adolescents' diet is typically high in saturated fat and sugar, along with low fruit & vegetable consumption.¹ Improving adolescents' eating habits reduces the risk of health problems, both long and short term. Establishing good eating habits is also important as these can be carried through to adulthood.

Obesity

Obesity is at unprecedented levels. Over a fifth of children are either overweight or obese in reception year; this rises to around a third in Year 6.² For 11-15 year olds, the levels are similarly high with 34% of 11-15 year old boys and 37% of 11-15 year old girls overweight or obese.³

Poverty and diet

Poverty and diet are related, and improving adolescents' food choice behaviour can be a way of addressing dietary disparities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Schools can make a difference

Making *small* changes to a school canteen can have remarkable effects on what students choose.⁴ Students can be nudged towards making a healthier decision when choosing what to have for a school lunch, as shown by a **recent UK study**.⁵ Simple strategies, such as **moving foods** to a new position, using **stickers & labels**, or changing the way food is **presented**, resulted in students being **2.5 times as likely to choose the promoted healthier foods**.

Crucially all these changes are not about changing the food on offer; instead it is about making it easier for students to make the better choice.

Why do it?

It's important Adolescents' diet falls short of dietary recommendations and the school dining environment provides a good opportunity to make a difference. Promoting healthy eating habits is critical in supporting the health and wellbeing of young people.

Pupil Premium students Diet, poverty & food choice are related; promoting better food habits can be a way of addressing dietary disparities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

New Ofsted framework & the National Curriculum

From September 2015, under the new Ofsted framework there is a greater emphasis on wellbeing, with inspectors looking for evidence of an ethos of healthy eating including in the school canteen.⁶ Implementing some of these nudge strategies is a practical way of demonstrating commitment to healthy eating. Doing this also complements the new emphasis on nutrition in the National Curriculum.

It's flexible There are many different strategies to nudge students towards a better choice. They are simple and effective, and range from e.g. rearranging foods, to putting stickers on packaging, or using new food containers. None of the strategies involve changes to the food on offer, and many strategies are resource free or low cost.

How to do it?

It's important that someone in the school has overall responsibility. There are 5 key steps:

1. **Involve the catering staff** [it's crucial to get buy-in from the catering team, so involve them from the beginning in choosing the target foods & nudge strategies]
2. **Decide on the food/s to target** [choose one or more foods, e.g. fruit, freshly prepared main meals, salads, water, fruit pots]
3. **Decide on the nudge strategy or strategies** that best suit your canteen and are most feasible [observe the canteen over break & lunchtime to see how students use it, and then consider the examples of nudge strategies given below]
4. **Purchase any resources** [e.g. stickers, new food containers, poster holders – not all strategies require resource outlay]
5. **Go for it!**

Review Once the nudge strategies are in place, it's important to continue to liaise closely with catering staff to ensure that the nudges are sustainable and easy to implement. Tweak or try new nudges depending on what works best for your school.

Examples of nudge strategies

- Place promoted foods immediately next to the till
- Rearrange chiller cabinets to put promoted foods at eye level
- Place promoted foods first in the line of food options
- Use stickers or labels for promoted foods
- Present promoted foods in accessible stands, e.g. fruit display stand
- Offer promoted foods as 'grab-and-go', e.g. in disposable containers



¹Bates et al (2014) *National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Results from Years 1-4 (combined) of the Rolling Programme (2008/2009 –2011/12)*. PHE, London. ²HSCIC (2014) *National Child Measurement Programme: England, 2013/14 school year*. HSCIC, London. ³Craig & Mindell (Eds) (2013) *Health Survey for England 2012: Health, social care and lifestyles*. HSCIC, London. ⁴Hanks et al (2013) *Smarter lunchrooms can address new school lunchroom guidelines and childhood obesity*. *J Pediatr* 162, 867–9. ⁵Ensaff et al (2015) *Food choice architecture: an intervention in a secondary school and its impact on students' plant-based food choices*. *Nutrients* 7, 4426-4437. ⁶Harford (2015) *Ofsted's inspection of how children and learners keep themselves healthy, including through healthy eating, under the new Common Inspection Framework from September 2015*. Official communication (letter), 23 February 2015.

Interested in finding out more?

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