



Rethinking Nutrition Education for Kids

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Parents, teachers and community members can all agree—we want healthy, happy kids. Teachers have endless requirements and curriculum standards to meet, one of which is teaching students some of the basics of nutrition. But, nutrition isn't always as straightforward as one might think, especially

with kids.

Teaching children about nutrition is tricky. It's tricky because two children can hear the exact same message and one may take it so seriously that they develop fear and anxiety around food where another child might be able to take the nutrition advice in stride and with nuance.

Teaching kids about nutrition is also tricky because when we talk about food and eating, we are often really talking about bodies and health. And when we're talking about bodies and health, there are often undercurrents of morality and worthiness. In many cases, kids have already picked up the subtle and pervasive messaging about their bodies or bodies in general that categorizes certain bodies as acceptable, other bodies as healthy, defining which bodies deserve love and which bodies need to be "fixed".

Because of the complexity surrounding food and bodies, when teachers innocently dive into the health and nutrition topics, there are some real landmines to be aware of to navigate successfully through these potentially tough discussions. In many cases, nutrition lessons at school are misinterpreted at best and at worst, may even lead to struggles with eating disorders. More awareness around how to successfully teach nutrition lessons can lead to what we all want: happy, healthy kids.



As an eating disorder registered dietitian, I see some of the lifelong consequences that messaging about food and bodies can bring to a person. No one is to blame for eating disorders and/or struggles with food and body image, but it's up to each of us to do our best to help without harming when approaching these tricky subjects.

Here are some suggestions for elementary school teachers to provide age-appropriate lessons about nutrition.

1. **Avoid use "healthy versus unhealthy" language.** Foods labeled as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, red light or green light is NOT helpful. Although there are always great intentions behind these types of nutrition lessons, teaching kids these types of categorization about foods is not helpful at best and harmful at worst. Kids are so literal that these messages tend to create guilt and shame when eating foods categorized as bad. We all know that kids (and the rest of us) will eat a slice of pizza again and will enjoy a cookie here or there and there's nothing wrong with that! The goal with nutrition isn't to never ever eat pizza again—it's to create balance. So, let's avoid this type of language especially with our kids because it's confusing and, for the very earnest and literal child, may even lead to severe restriction and/or food fears.
2. **Teach that food is fuel for the body.** Help kids understand that eating food is what makes playing, coloring, learning and all their favorite things possible. No need to dive into tons of details here, but helping kids recognize that they need to give their bodies energy through food so they can have fun and learn is a positive and encouraging way to help kids connect food as fuel.
3. **Encourage trying new foods.** In the classroom, teachers can discuss students' favorite foods and what how to try a new food that might seem scary at first. Teachers could also make a simple recipe with their class and have a voluntary taste test at the end to encourage trying new things and to teach the about variety.
4. **Teach the principle of variety.** When teaching about variety, it's important to understand that the human body does not require perfection each meal or each day. A variety of colors, food groups, cooking methods, etc. over a few days is a great way to explain variety and allows for flexibility rather than getting wrapped up in the "daily requirement" mentality. Getting adequate balance and variety over the course of a few days or a week is more realistic and is more grounded in the science of how the human body actually works.
5. **Connect kids to gardening, agriculture and teach them about where foods come from.** Helping kids get involved with where their food originates can help decrease the natural instinct to be fearful of new foods. Talk about farming and agriculture and explain how foods go from farm to table. (You guys are already do this! This is shows how important your work is. KH)
6. **Reinforce the idea that all foods can fit.** If a child raises their hand and shares something that they learned at home is a "bad" food, for example, a teacher could reinforce that all foods can fit. We don't want too much of any one thing: we don't want too many grapes,



too much Halloween candy or too many carrots. Too much of anything won't be ideal for our bodies and it's all about getting a wide variety of foods over time.

7. **Teach kids to respect biological diversity.** Since talking about food and nutrition really means talking about bodies, when teachers educate their students on nutrition, it can be extremely helpful to reinforce the fact that we all come in all shapes and sizes and that's okay. Messages of size diversity in context of a lesson on nutrition is a crucial thing to casually mention—and it honestly could save a life. Never, ever relay the message that food is to be used to manipulate body size. This is harmful messaging.

This is an extremely precarious topic. There is so much to be said about this and if you're interested in more, [check out Ellyn Satter's great research and resources](#) about nutrition education in schools. Even to a trained professional, it can be tricky to navigate talking about nutrition in a way that doesn't harm. Overall, keep the message positive, encourage healthy attitudes toward food and help kids learn how to connect to their bodies.