

# School Food Matters

**How to talk to children and young people about food**



# How to talk to children and young people about food

We talk about food every day but often don't consider that the words we choose can have a big impact on someone else's relationship with food.

Many of the phrases we use to encourage children and young people to eat can make them feel pressured about food. Using words such as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, puts parameters around food that can lead to problematic thoughts and behaviours for children who are predisposed to eating disorders or who already show patterns of disordered eating.

## What the Research Says

Studies have shown that giving positive "do" messages about health are more effective than negative "don't" messages. For example, saying "eating protein will help your muscles grow," is received more positively than "don't eat fries for lunch; they are unhealthy."

## It's all in our words

Changing the language used around food in school and rephrasing the way we talk about food in a positive way can lead to more harmonious mealtimes and improve the relationship children have with food.

On the next page you will find some common phrases we often use during meal times and alternative ways to phrase these in a more positive way.

# How does food help our bodies?

## Energy levels

“Cucumbers are made up of 96% water - they help keep you hydrated and maintain your energy levels”

## Concentration and cognitive functioning

“Drinking enough water helps us to concentrate and think clearly”

## Immunity

• “White-coloured vegetables like garlic and cauliflower help maintain your immunity and a good hormonal balance”  
“Red coloured fruit and veg, like tomatoes and red pepper help your body fight diseases”

## Digestive health

“Fruits are high in fibre, which helps your digestive system work properly”

## Mood regulation

“Eating regularly, and eating foods that release energy slowly, like wholegrains, can help to keep your blood sugar steady and improve your mood and concentration”

## Heart

“Purple vegetables like beetroot and red cabbage are good for your heart which keeps your blood pumping properly”  
“Spinach is full of iron which helps keep our heart happy”

# Commonly used phrases and how to change them

## **Instead of saying:**

“Eat a bit more,” or “You didn’t eat enough. Just have one more bite and you can get up from the table.”

## **Try this:**

“Do you feel as though you have had enough? Remember that there will be no more food until...”

In this case, the child thinks they are full, but the teacher is suggesting they should eat more. The child may believe that if they listen to the teacher they may be able to leave, whereas if they stop eating they may have to wait. Trying to control how much children eat can lead to overeating or make them feel bad about themselves.

## **Instead of saying:**

“If you want to go and play you need to finish what’s on your plate,” or “If you want dessert you need to finish what’s on your plate.”

## **Try this:**

- Offer everyone dessert no matter what or how much the child ate of the balanced meal.
- Don’t have rules about eating and playtime

Children know instinctively how much food their bodies need, however where dessert is involved, they will ignore those satiety signals. If we draw too much of their attention to dessert, they will probably want to have it but if we don’t, they will say no, or leave it if they are full.

# Commonly used phrases and how to change them

## **Instead of saying:**

“Don’t forget to eat your veg.”

## **Try this:**

"What about [insert name of vegetable here], have you tried this before?" If they say they don't like it, ask them what they don't like about it and what other veg they are willing to try?

Offer a variety of different veg and ask them which one they like the most. Encourage them to try new foods without pressure.

If they don't like the food, ask them what it was they didn't like. Was it the taste or how it felt in their mouth? If they do like a food, avoid over-praising the child or saying things like "I knew you would like it." Thank them for trying the food and ask them what they liked about it.

# Top Tips

- Avoid using the term healthy or unhealthy to describe food
- Talk about the properties of a food and how it can help the child or young person's body and mind
- Steer clear of using food as a reward or using the dessert bargain
- Ask the child or young person (child) what they like and don't like about a new food
- Try not to pressure the child to eat a specific food, even if your intentions are good
- Encourage the child to eat until they are not hungry any more
- Don't talk about diets or food avoidance
- Expose the child to a wide range of foods without pressure. Just leave new foods on the table - or try a bite yourself