

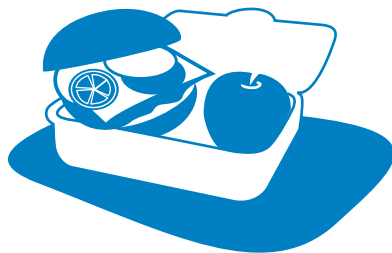
Safe and Pleasant Eating Areas at School

Making the case for safe and pleasant eating areas

Where children eat their lunch affects their sense of well-being and the enjoyment they feel at their lunch breaks. To develop healthy eating habits, students must respect and enjoy their surroundings. The school lunch period is a break where children can interact and build their social skills. Offering a clean, welcoming space with adequate seating encourages children to enjoy healthy foods and beverages and value mealtimes with friends. It also reduces noise and garbage, and contributes to better behaviour by students during lunchtime.

What are safe and pleasant eating areas?

A safe and pleasant eating area is one that provides a clean, safe, calm and enjoyable space to eat lunch. Adult or senior supervision is provided while students eat lunch. Safe food handling training is encouraged for volunteers, lunchroom monitors and paid staff who help with school food service (eg, in the student nutrition programs, on 'special food' days, in milk programs).



Nutrition Tools for Schools

Schools working to create a Healthy School Nutrition Environment should pay attention to the setting where students eat their lunch. Even if the budget does not allow for major structural changes or equipment purchases, all efforts should be made to ensure there is a safe and pleasant space that will have students feeling refreshed for their afternoon classes.

Benefits of safe and pleasant eating areas

Safe and pleasant eating areas:

- Provide an enjoyable atmosphere in which to eat lunch
- Reduce the risk of students' being injured
- Allow for adequate and comfortable seating to encourage comfortable dining
- Prevent excessive noise levels
- Promote healthy eating habits
- Link to the 'whole school approach' to creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment
- Show parents and the local community that the school takes the health of its students seriously

Action ideas for school lunchrooms/eating areas

- Develop a code of conduct with the students regarding acceptable behaviour in the lunchroom to manage noise, bullying, safety, etc. Post a giant-sized poster on the lunchroom wall (make it fun - display as a scroll, a formal typewritten contract, a grocery list) and review with the students at the start of the school year. Include the code of conduct in the school newsletter.
- To maximize eating time, set a fixed lunchroom routine at the start of the school year. Keep the routine simple and orderly – children will quickly adapt to the process. Many schools stagger the lunch period – older students eat first and then head outside for recess. While the older students are headed outside, the younger students enter the lunchroom and the process repeats.
- Invite the public health unit/department to deliver a healthy eating in-service to lunchroom monitors at the start of the school year. Often, lunchroom monitors are asked to provide students with guidance on choosing allergy-safe foods or to support a child with special food needs (eg, diabetes, lactose intolerance). Lunchroom monitors can be positive role models and promote healthy food choices and food safety with students during mealtimes.
- The lunchroom/eating area is a perfect place to promote the school recycling program. Use a bulletin board to highlight recycling tips and to identify packages/containers that can be recycled. Make sure all recycling bins are properly labelled.
- Assign older students to help lunchroom supervisors with opening containers/packages, garbage disposal and clean-up. Student lunchroom duty can be rotated on a weekly basis.
- To speed up lunchroom clean-up, collect empty lunch bags in large, class-specific bins. Bins can be wheeled back to each classroom by the student lunchroom helpers during recess time. Students can collect their lunch bags as they enter the classroom.
- Display student artwork on walls /bulletin boards around the lunchroom. Reserve an area for healthy eating information. Playing light music in the lunchroom may help to control excess noise.
- Decorating ideas!
 - Dress up the lunchroom/eating area for special occasions
 - Post an inspirational message-of-the-day, riddle or a joke for students to read
 - Acknowledge birthdays on a weekly basis
 - Celebrate multiculturalism

Does your school have a Healthy School Nutrition Environment?

A Healthy School Nutrition Environment exists when a school promotes healthy eating through words *and* actions. Students get the same message about food, nutrition and healthy eating wherever food is served – in the classroom, in the school and at home. The following nine Essential Elements¹ are recommended for a school to have a healthy nutrition environment.

Whole School Approach	Essential Elements
In the School	<p>Does your school offer healthy, reasonably priced and culturally-appropriate food choices? For example does your school have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healthy fundraising? • a school milk program? • a healthy tuck shop? • healthy 'special food' days? • non-food rewards in the classroom? • healthy classroom celebrations? • healthy refreshments at school meetings and events?
	Do parents, teachers and volunteers role model healthy eating and body image behaviours at school?
	Does your school have a Student Nutrition Program (eg, breakfast, snack and lunch)?
	Does your school practise safe food practices and have an allergy-safe environment?
	Are nutrition breaks at school appropriately scheduled?
	Does your school have a food and nutrition policy?
	In the Classroom
Do teachers have up-to-date nutrition resources to support the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum?	
In Homes and In the Community	Does your school provide student, parent and community education about healthy eating?

¹ Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health School Nutrition Workgroup. 2004 *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.

Need more information?

Public health offers *Nutrition Tools for Schools - a toolkit for elementary schools*. Whether you're a teacher, parent, school administrator or volunteer, this toolkit will lead you through a step-by-step process to creating a healthy nutrition environment in your school. *Nutrition Tools for Schools* contains a variety of resources and tools to implement the nine Essential Elements listed above. For more information about this toolkit, please contact your public health unit/department.

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