



# lunchtimes packed with purpose.

a teacher's guide to supporting  
positive food experiences at school.



Co-developed by



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# why this guide exists.



**1/3**

daily food intake happens at school.



**25%**

of Australian adolescents meet the criteria for an eating disorder.<sup>1</sup>



**77%**

of Australian adolescents report body image distress.<sup>2</sup>

Around a third of a child's daily food intake happens at school, so conversations about food inevitably come up.

**“These everyday moments can help shape how children think about food and their bodies.”**

This guide, co-developed by National Nutrition Foundation and The Embrace Collective, offers simple tips to support teachers to manage lunchtime challenges and conversations that help children develop positive relationships with food and their bodies for life.

## the link with body image and why it's important.

How children think about food and their bodies is closely connected. Some messages about what or how much to eat, or about body size and shape, can create shame, anxiety or guilt around eating. In addition to this, poor body image can lead children to skip meals, restrict foods or eat for comfort rather than hunger. By creating calm, neutral lunchtime environments that focus on nourishment, enjoyment and what bodies can do, teachers can help children develop balanced relationships with both food and their bodies.

1. Mitchison et al., 2020    2. Milton et al., 2021



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# how we talk about food matters.

Positively impacting children's relationships with food happens through a mix of messaging and modelling. Rather than critiquing or judging foods, conversations about food should focus on sharing what you enjoy eating, noticing how different foods help us feel good, and valuing variety, to gently reinforce the message that food is about nourishment, enjoyment and care for our bodies.

## helpful phrases to try.

"I felt so great after eating a colourful lunch today."

"There are some really fresh and tasty new options in the canteen aren't there?"

"I love how you listened to your body and ate what felt right for you!"

"What's your favourite food to help you feel strong?"

## messages that make a difference.

As adults, we've heard a lot of messages about food throughout our lives. Here are some helpful things you can talk about and role model in front of children to help build positive relationships with food:

Fuelling our brains and bodies helps us grow, play and thrive.

Many factors influence the foods in our lunchboxes, including taste, texture, preferences, allergies, religion, culture, medical needs and food availability.

Food connects us to family, community, culture, tradition, history and the land.

Our bodies send signals that guide us when to eat. These cues are different for everyone, and we can learn to trust and respond to our own needs.

We can focus on what to add to our lunchboxes (rather than what to remove) to ensure our bodies and brains are healthy and can continue to grow and change throughout our life.

Let's eat the foods we enjoy and that help power us through the rest of our school day.



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# navigating common lunchtime challenges.

Everyday, teachers are interacting with students at mealtimes and there are opportunities to support them in developing positive lifelong attitudes toward food and their bodies. We're here to help support you with this.

Here's an update on the latest research and advice on how to manage the challenges teachers tell us they are having.

## **lunchbox policing.**

Approaches to lunchboxes have evolved over time. Current guidance encourages schools to create calm, inclusive food environments that support children's confidence, rather than critiquing or commenting on what kids bring to school, or how they choose to eat their lunch.

## **selective eating.**

Selective eating is increasingly understood as a sensory experience rather than a behavioural choice, and it is particularly common for neurodivergent children. Familiar, safe foods help children feel secure and supported throughout the school day. By providing predictable routines, calm eating spaces and reassurance, teachers can create the conditions that help children gradually expand confidence and wellbeing around food.

## **food insecurity.**

Cost of living pressures have reduced the variety and access to foods for many families, meaning schools and teachers might feel like they need to step in. Universal strategies like P&C association-supported breakfast clubs or grant-funded fruit baskets are great options. See the toolkit at the end of this guide for some school-based food relief organisations.

## **busy kids.**

It can be hard to see well-intentioned lunches go untouched because kids just want to run and play. Having a structured time for eating (where kids stay in the lunch space until an allocated time) can be effective in ensuring everyone gets the fuel they need to power through the afternoon. This is a preferred approach to pressuring or encouraging kids to eat.

## **big appetites.**

Some days, it can seem like kids eat an extraordinary amount of food! Some teachers worry about what and how much kids are eating, concerned they might be having 'too much' of certain foods. It is important that we think about child nutrition as being a balance over the day, week, month and year. Childrens' appetites naturally change from day-to-day and their preferences may change over time. This is a part of growing and learning to listen to their bodies.

## **'not hungry'.**

Given fluctuating appetites, some kids might not be as hungry some days. As kids get older, they might start to become more embarrassed about bringing food to school or eating in front of others, and say they are 'not hungry' to avoid eating lunch. If you notice this is happening often, resources from the [National Eating Disorders Collaboration](#) and [Butterfly Foundation](#) might be useful.

## **food talk.**

Our bodies, families, tastes, likes and dislikes are all different. You have an opportunity to support a school culture where every student feels respected and included by their peers. Encouraging kind, thoughtful comments about lunchboxes helps support wellbeing and belonging. By choosing curiosity and respect over judgement, we can make lunchtime a positive experience for everyone. So let's not say "yuck" to other people's "yum"!

## **the bottom line...**

**Neutral, inclusive, low-pressure approaches to creating food environments are best.**



# supporting autonomy at lunch.

When children are trusted to make their own choices, without being rushed, persuaded, or rewarded for eating, they are more likely to build confidence, self-regulation and a positive relationship with food over time.

Teachers play an important role by creating a calm, supportive environment where food is offered without pressure.

Here are some ways you can support autonomy at lunchtimes.

## 1. practice responsive feeding approaches in school-appropriate ways.

The Ellyn Satter Division of Responsibility highlights the importance of shared roles at food times.



In education settings, this approach supports children to tune into their own hunger, fullness and preferences.

 [Learn more about the Satter Division of Responsibility.](#)



## 2. set the conditions for success.

### provide seated eating time.

Aim for at least 20 minutes of dedicated eating time after students sit down, not including time lining up or handwashing.

### keep lunch calm and predictable.

Maintain the same routine, clear start/finish and minimal noise or distractions. Unrushed, enjoyable mealtimes support better self-regulation and willingness to eat.

## 3. use food neutral language and avoid shame.

### call foods by their names.

Avoid labelling or categorising foods into 'good', 'bad', 'junk', 'healthy', 'unhealthy' or 'sometimes foods'. It is most helpful for young people if you just call foods by their name such as 'strawberries', 'sandwich' or 'cupcake'.

### choose neutral food language.

Avoid commenting on what children should or shouldn't have in their lunchbox and try to use neutral phrasing wherever possible, like: "Let's eat our lunch now," "Choose what works for your body today."

### helpful phrases to try.

"How does your body feel after lunch?"

"What foods help you feel ready for learning?"

"What foods help your body feel strong when you're running or moving?"

"What foods help you feel calm and focused during learning time?"

# final notes.

When it comes to food and your students' wellbeing, it helps to keep the bigger picture in mind. Families support their children's nutrition in many different ways across the day, shaped by culture, routine, access and individual needs. At school, teachers see just one part of that picture.

By approaching food conversations with openness, curiosity and care, teachers can help reinforce positive food environments.

**On the following page, we have included a printable cheat-sheet of the conversation prompts included in this guide.**

**“You are an important part of the everyday moments that help students build positive relationships with food and their bodies.”**

These everyday moments, combined with strong partnerships with families, support children to develop positive attitudes toward food and their bodies over time.



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# lunchtimes packed with purpose.

a cheat sheet for teachers.

## set the conditions for success.

Aim to provide 20 minutes of seated eating time.

Maintain a calm, predictable lunchtime routine with minimal noise or distractions.

## reinforce that food is about nourishment & enjoyment.

Try these phrases:

"I felt so great after eating a colourful lunch today."

"There are some really fresh and tasty new lunch options in the canteen aren't there?"

"I love how you listened to your body and ate what felt right for you!"

"What's your favourite food to help you feel strong?"

## focus on how food supports students.

Try these phrases:

"How does your body feel after lunch?"

"What foods help you feel ready for learning?"

"What foods help your body feel strong when you're running or moving?"

"What foods help you feel calm and focused during learning time?"

## call foods by their names.

It is most helpful for young people if you just call foods by their name such as 'strawberries', 'sandwich' or 'cupcake'.

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# more resources.

## free curriculum-aligned food education lesson plans.

For more support bringing inclusive, practical nutrition education to life, freshSNAP offers hundreds of free, curriculum-aligned lesson plans, classroom activities, and training opportunities.



Explore the K-10 suite of resources here!

## free masterclass for teachers.

For practical advice and actionable strategies about what to do and say to your students in relation to bodies, food and weight, watch the free 20-minute Embrace Kids Teacher Masterclass.



Watch the free masterclass here!

## for your toolkit.



### The Embrace Collective

Engaging, evidence-based resources supporting positive body image for young people. Check out the Teacher Masterclass for a quick, free video PD.



### National Nutrition Foundation

Improving Australia's food systems through partnerships, programs and advocacy. Creating and delivering impactful, large-scale programs across Australia.

- **freshSNAP** offers hundreds of free, curriculum-aligned lesson plans, classroom activities, and training opportunities.
- **Healthy Eating Advisory Service** offers free support for Victorian organisations to provide and promote healthier food and drinks.
- **Vic Kids Eat Well** transforms the food and drink environments where Victorian kids spend their time.



### National Eating Disorders Collaboration

The Eating Disorders in Schools Guide provides an overview of everything school teachers, administrators, and wellbeing teams need to know about the prevention and identification of disordered eating in schools.



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## for your toolkit.

- **Butterfly Foundation**  
Support for Australians impacted by eating disorders and body image issues.
- **Eating Disorders Families Australia**  
Support for families and carers of those living with an eating disorder.
- **Foodbank**  
Run school breakfast, lunch and food relief programs across Australia.
- **Eat Up**  
Partners with schools to provide free lunches for students experiencing hunger.
- **OzHarvest**  
Provides a mix of quality rescued food for school breakfast, lunch and cooking programs, as well as hampers for families needing support (Perth only).

