

HELPING KIDS

eat better: creating relaxing and enjoyable meal environments

The environments in which young people eat their meals play a role in the adoption of healthy lifestyle habits. Schools, especially elementary schools, were not designed to accommodate a large number of children at lunchtime. Nonetheless, close to two meals a day are eaten at school or in after-school programs.

The meal environments of today's youth are very different from those of previous generations. **A high proportion of kids regularly eat alone at home.** Over half of those aged 10 to 17 years **eat at least three times a week in front of a screen** (TV, computer). This habit contributes to excess consumption of poor-quality foods. In addition to eating in a distracted way and paying little attention to hunger and fullness cues, young people are often exposed to ads encouraging them to eat more than they need. It has been demonstrated that family meals are associated with better eating habits.

WHY TAKE ACTION?

Because tastes and preferences are acquired through pleasurable experiences. It is therefore important that children, from a very young age, eat their meals in enjoyable environments where **the pleasure of discovering** will determine their food choices.

Because **external stimuli** (verbal and visual messages, etc.) can reinforce or weaken natural hunger and fullness cues. An enjoyable environment is one in which certain conditions are in place (tranquility, consideration, empathy) that will help children **recognize and respond to fullness cues.**

Because eating is a pleasurable, social activity. That is why **the location and atmosphere at mealtimes** play a key role in healthy eating.

MANY FACTORS INFLUENCE MEALTIME ENVIRONMENTS

Inappropriate locations — Eating facilities at some schools are outdated or inappropriate. Young people have a negative perception of the environment in which they eat.

Too many or not enough rules — Roughly 50% of daycare centres and a small number of municipalities have a food policy. Few have put measures in place (38% of schools) to create an enjoyable mealtime environment.

Variable supervision quality — The training of meal supervisors is often inadequate. A number of employees are unhappy about this situation, and would like to receive training in order to better supervise children at mealtimes.

Family meals are important for parents, but are less and less of a priority. Planning meals and managing conflicts are a challenge and, for some parents, food insecurity caused by financial constraints is a greater concern than creating an enjoyable environment for family meals.



EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS

DAYCARES AND CHILDCARE SETTINGS

- Review rules and measures that make it difficult to create enjoyable meal environments and healthy routines.
- Adopt a comprehensive food policy that recognizes the importance of creating enjoyable meal environments, and plan measures to support its implementation.
- Offer training to educators, cooks and other employees.
- Establish agreements allowing staff to consult experts on early childhood nutrition.
- Create an environment that stimulates socialization during meals.
- Improve communication with parents.
- Develop communication tools to raise awareness among decision-makers and stakeholders.

SCHOOLS AND AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

- Review rules and measures that make it difficult to create enjoyable meal environments and healthy routines.
- Adopt the Going the Healthy Route at School framework policy and plan measures to support actions promoting enjoyable meal environments.
- Take meal environments into account when planning new eating facilities at schools.
- Provide training to after-school staff.
- Create special eating areas.
- Ask students to design and decorate eating areas.
- Organize educational activities on food and eating guidelines.
- Develop communication tools to raise awareness among decision-makers and stakeholders.

COMMUNITY GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS

- Review rules and measures that make it difficult to create enjoyable meal environments and healthy routines.
- Provide basic training to facilitators.
- Establish agreements allowing staff to consult experts on early childhood nutrition.
- Set up special family-style eating areas.
- Find ways to have constructive discussions with parents and to establish support networks around the theme of enjoyable meal environments.
- Develop communication tools to raise awareness among decision-makers and stakeholders.

MUNICIPALITIES

- Emphasize in policies and revitalization plans the importance of creating enjoyable meal environments in the following locations, and develop measures to implement actions: arenas, recreation centres, parks, community gardens, public markets, day camps, festival sites, libraries.
- Provide basic training to day camp monitors.
- Provide tables, picnic areas, barbecues, water fountains, sheltered areas, etc.
- Include food and eating guidelines for children in cooking workshops.
- Stock municipal libraries with relevant reference books for families.
- Develop communication tools to raise awareness among decision-makers and day camp personnel.

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Prévention
Fondation Lucie
et André Chagnon