Creating Supportive Food Environments

Booklet

A resource for community organizations who offer food programs or talk about food and nutrition

Saskatchewan Health Authority
Food Mentoring Toolkit

The purpose of this booklet is to provide more detailed information on creating supportive food environments. It is not designed for the purpose of following along with the video.

The information provided in this booklet, and all Food Mentoring Toolkit resources, is intended for general education purposes and should not replace medical advice. Consult a registered dietitian or qualified health professional before making significant changes to diet or lifestyle.

Creating Supportive Food Environments

What's ahead in this booklet

- Factors affecting our food choices
- Eating together and modeling positive mealtimes and food attitudes
- What happens when food is used as a reward
- Awareness of marketing and advertising
- Commonly asked questions

Key messages

1. A supportive food environment makes nutritious choices more visible, affordable and accessible.
2. Overcoming barriers to eating well starts with an awareness of what impacts our food choices.
3. Recognizing marketing tactics and limiting exposure to them, where possible, are important in reducing their influence on our food choices.
4. We can all be powerful role models that help to shape attitudes about food, eating habits and food preferences.

Words matter:

You will notice throughout the Food Mentoring Toolkit that food neutral language is used. If you would like to learn more about this topic, here is a link to the Food Neutrality handout.

Supporting Materials

Handouts

- Organizational Food Environment Assessment

Facilitator guide:

If you are interested in speaking to clients about this topic, please email publichealthnutrition@saskhealthauthority.ca to request a facilitator guide. The guide includes a step-by-step plan for watching the video as a group and working through group activities and discussions.

If you would like to watch a video on this topic, visit the Creating Supportive Food Environments section on the Food Mentoring Toolkit home page. For more information, there are additional resources listed at the end of this chapter.

Creating Supportive Food Environments

Our food environment

The foods we eat are often not just about choosing what is healthiest for us. There are many reasons why we eat the foods we do. Some are more obvious like hunger and taste, while others can be less obvious invitations to eat like smells of food nearby, advertising and marketing, or just because the food was there. By becoming more aware of what is affecting our food choices, we can develop strategies for overcoming some of the barriers to eating well.

Our food environment consists of all the food available in your community (i.e. public places, childcare, schools, workplaces, events), the promotion of food and beverages, the pricing of foods, and the policies in your community surrounding accessibility to food[1]. Places where we spend a large portion of our day can significantly impact our food choices.

We are often told that choices about food are up to each individual. You may have heard the saying “make better food choices”. The truth is, our environment - the physical, economic, political and socioeconomic surroundings, opportunities and conditions around us - can all influence food choices, eating habits and health.[7,8]

It is important to understand the impact that the food environment, and the people within it, has on food choices in order to help make the healthy choice the easy choice.

Many factors affect our food choices:

- Hunger
- How food makes us feel physically and emotionally
- Taste and smell
- Culture, religion, traditions
- Convenience
- Pleasure and enjoyment
- Cooking skills or abilities
- Cooking equipment available
- Time available to shop, cook, clean up
- The food around us
- Transportation to food
- How our caregivers ate and how we were raised
- What our friends eat
- If it is a "good deal"
- The cost of food
- Emotions (angry, tired, bored, sad, stressed, excited, etc.)
- Social events with food at home, work, childcare and school
- Whether we prepare our own food, or eat what someone else makes
- Dietary needs for health conditions

Creating supportive food environments

A supportive food environment simplifies food choices by making nutritious options more available, visible and affordable.[1] This includes all foods in or near home, childcare, school or work. Supportive environments not only increase exposure to nutritious foods, but they also teach and establish positive eating practices and behaviours.[9] The more someone is exposed to a variety of foods, the more comfortable they will become with them.

It takes time and careful planning to create supportive food environments. Here are some strategies to consider:

- Make eating environments pleasant.
- Provide nutritious options when food is served.
- Do not use food as a reward.
- Give those that will be eating the food an opportunity to help plan, prepare and serve it.
- Restrict marketing of highly processed foods and those that are high in sodium, sugars or saturated fats.
- For organizations, develop a nutrition policy and put together a team to involve staff and/or participants in improving the organization's food environment.
- Support comfortable and safe feeding of infants and children.
- Promote your space as welcoming for individuals to breastfeed or express breast milk.

For more tips visit Food guide friendly: Create a healthier food environment - Canada's Food Guide[6].

Eating together

Communal meals are beneficial for everyone, even if they are virtual.[17]

Explore More

Communal or family meals are terms used to describe people eating together, either physically or virtually. It can include family, friends, coworkers, classmates, care providers, or other acquaintances.

Even infants who are not eating solid foods yet enjoy and benefit from watching others eat. Research shows that children and adolescents who share family meals three or more times per week are more likely to have healthy eating patterns than those who share them together less often. Children and adolescents who eat with their families have a decreased risk of engaging in disordered eating and high-risk behaviours such as substance abuse, smoking, fighting and drug use, and have shown improved academic performance.[10] Eating together also has benefits for older adults such as better intakes, physical and mental well-being, as well as an increased sense of independence.[11] A communal or family meal can be as simple as sitting together for snacks if timing and scheduling does not allow mealtimes together.

At home, if you want to eat together more often, start small by having one family meal a week and increase as able. In your organization, host events with food and create opportunities to eat casually together, rather than at individuals' workspaces. Focus on mealtimes being a time to come together, bond, and enjoy each other's company. Mealtimes are also great opportunities to learn about each other's values and traditions and model positive food behaviours.[12]

Some strategies to make eating more social include:

- Joining a collective kitchen or cooking with friends. Find a place where a few people can meet to plan, shop and prepare several meals together. Take those meals home, freeze them and reheat them when they do not feel like shopping or cooking.
- Do a recipe exchange.
- Bring generations together to cook or bake and share traditions.
- Check with local community centers for communal meal gatherings.

Positive mealtimes

Mealtimes are ideally a positive and enjoyable experience no matter where we eat. They are a time for nourishment and socializing. They also offer opportunities to learn about food, eating and tradition.

To create positive mealtimes for all ages, here are some things that can help:

- Protect meals as a dedicated time to eat in a safe and calm environment, allowing others to eat food they enjoy without shame, guilt or pressure.
- Minimize distractions such as background noise, interruptions, multi-tasking, cluttered eating areas, and TV's, screens or phones.
- Allow adequate time during meals to eat, interact and socialize. Arrange tables so people can face each other, making it easier to talk.
- Create nice eating spaces by having artwork on the walls, eating near a window, providing comfortable seating, etc.
- Allow each person, no matter their age, to decide for themselves whether and how much to eat and never force anyone to eat or finish certain foods. Assist with feeding or eating only if needed or requested.
- Teach children how to politely ask for food or turn it down.
- Model the healthy behaviours you are trying to teach – not labelling foods as 'good' or 'bad', trying new and various foods, enjoying your food, sitting and eating together.
- Involve those eating the meals in food selection and preparation when possible.
- Include cultural foods and traditions in menu planning and at celebrations.

Modeling a positive food attitude

When we eat food together, we can be powerful role models that help to shape attitudes about food, eating habits and food preferences. We may also have the ability to teach food skills such as shopping and cooking. Most people learn more from what they see and experience, rather than from what they are told.

How can you set a good example? Start by reflecting on how some of your own beliefs and experiences with food affect the way you eat and provide food for others.

- Do you find eating enjoyable?
- Can you eat without feeling you "should" or "should not"?
- Can you eat as much as you like without feeling shameful?
- Do you offer foods based on Canada's food guide?
- Do you make time and space for eating together?
- Do you offer a variety of foods whether you like them or not?
- When eating with children, do you avoid statements like "you must eat this before I give you that" or "just try one bite"?

What happens when food is used as a reward

Using food as a reward impacts the food environment and can be harmful. It makes the food used as a reward more appealing. It also has the potential to interfere with our ability to recognize hunger and fullness which can have negative long-term consequences.

Here are examples of how rewards and punishments can be harmful to health:

Situation	Consequence
Pressure to finish a meal or certain food by rewarding with dessert	Eating past fullness and making that reward food more desirable
Rewarding with sweet foods for good performance regardless of hunger	May begin rewarding and comforting themselves with food when they are not hungry
Offering incentives like pizza parties	These foods become more desirable and connected with accomplishment
Punishing 'bad' behaviour by taking away physical activity like recess	Increases sedentary time
Punishing with physical activity like running laps	May learn to dislike physical activity and view it as a punishment

Using food as a reward in classrooms, recreation settings, community programs, or at home can be confusing as it does not model the same behaviour that is encouraged. It teaches to behave well or work hard just to get a reward, not to understand the true value of these behaviours.

Check out the resource Nutrition Bites: Food As A Reward for tips on non-food rewards.

Awareness of marketing and advertising

Food marketing is everywhere! It can include advertisements on social media, the internet or TV, as well as those on menu boards, vending machines or on sponsored team wear. Companies are strategic in product placement, pricing and promotions to entice us to buy their product. For example, foods at eye level or by the checkout in stores are placed there because they are more likely to be purchased.

Children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to food marketing on TV and social media. Young children may be unable to tell the difference between advertising and programming and are likely to believe what they see in advertisements. Although teenagers have more critical thinking skills, they are still likely to believe the claims made by advertisements and more likely to remember ads.[14]

Explore More

Why does marketing target children?

Children have tremendous buying power as they are able to influence family purchases with "kidfluence" or "pester power". This accounts for more than $1 trillion of spending in North America per year. Companies profit from fostering brand loyalty and creating "lifelong customers." Some of the world's leading branding and marketing experts remark "a lifetime customer may be worth $100,000 to a retailer, making effective 'cradle-to-grave' strategies extremely valuable." [15]

Recognizing marketing tactics and limiting exposure to them where possible are important in reducing their influence on our food choices. Increasing the opportunities for *everyone* to be exposed to nutritious foods makes a difference.

Ways to limit marketing when it does not align with what you teach:

- Assess where in your home, school or organization that you may have unwanted marketing and do your best to remove or limit it. Some places to watch for this include books, posters, toys, TV, games, vending machines and coupons you give out.
- Limit screen time and find ways to be active instead. If using screens, apps or online sites, choose ad-free platforms.
- Consider sponsorships from companies other than those that market foods high in saturated fats, sugars or sodium.
- Call on government to stop marketing food to kids (stopmarketingtokids.ca/e-advocacy/)

Explore more

Setting screen time limits

- Be a good role model with your own screen use.
- Turn off devices at mealtime.
- Turn off screens when no one is using them, including background TV.
- Choose physical activities over screen time.

Consider the placement, pricing, presentation and promotion of food at your organization. Here are some strategies:

- Make nutritious foods attractive, desirable and easy to access.
- Promote nutritious food items by presenting them in exciting ways, using clever names and colorful posters.
- When selling foods, price the more nutritious food items lower than foods that are highly processed or high in saturated fats, sodium or sugars.
- In cafeteria-style services, place nutritious food items near the front of the line or in areas that are easier to reach.

Commonly Asked Questions

1. What can we do as individuals to change our food environment?

- Consider the food served for events and celebrations at home, childcare, school and work as a whole.
- Shop with a grocery list based on a meal plan to ensure that your food environment provides nutritious options.
- Keep nutritious foods more visible in fridges, pantries, or on countertops.
- Be aware of how different types of plates, cups and serving utensils affect portions, food waste, and ability to eat.
- Serve snacks at the table to reduce distractions while eating.
- Package bulk items in individual serving sizes (i.e. make small bags or containers of cut up apples or orange slices) to increase opportunity for nutritious snacks versus prepackaged items.
- Cook larger batches of food and freeze to save food preparation time and reduce use of processed convenience foods. Many nutritious foods freeze well such as rice, beans, soups, stews, and sauces.

2. Our organization wants to improve our food environment. What are some tips to get us started?

- The best way to find out how to improve the food environment is to ask your participants and staff what they think. Put together a team to involve staff and/or participants in improving the organization's food environment.
- Evaluate your food environment and come up with ideas together for what your organization would like to achieve (see Organizational Food Environment Checklist).

- Be aware of what other events and programs your participants are a part of and the food that is available to them. For example, remember that while your organization may only be providing hot dogs once a month, they may also be attending several other programs that could result in participants having hot dogs often.
    - When providing meals or snacks, include at least one nutritious choice.
    - Serve water and milk instead of juice or pop. Serve tea and coffee with milk instead of coffee creamer.
    - Limit the amount and frequency that pastries, cookies and baked goods are accepted as donations.
- Set aside a clean, quiet space for families to feed their children should they request it. Educate your staff on how to make families comfortable to feed their children any way and anywhere while in public. See the SHA Baby-Friendly Spaces toolkit for ideas.
- Advocate for nutritious foods in your organization's neighbourhood. For example, your organization could request your corner store to sell fresh produce to increase your program participants' access to them.

Additional Reading

Healthy Foods for my Recreation Setting – Government of Saskatchewan

Building Food Environments for Healthy Communities – Public Health Nutritionists of Saskatchewan

Marketing Can Influence Your Food Choices - Canada's Food Guide

Protecting Children's Right to a Healthy Food Environment – UNICEF

Baby-Friendly Spaces – Saskatchewan Health Authority

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