

Taking a fresh look.....

at teaching about food



**Irish Heart
Foundation**

The National Stroke & Heart Charity

It can be challenging to talk about food when students are coming from such different circumstances and backgrounds. Young people have told us that some classroom activities and discussion about food can feel **judgemental** or **stigmatising**. These guidelines will help teachers to avoid this.

The aim of this guidance is to support teachers to move beyond simply giving health information to helping young people to **apply** health information in their own lives.

The Irish Heart Foundation work directly with young people and teachers in post-primary schools and their communities.

This guidance was developed in discussion with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

Food is more than just nutrition

It is important to look at the whole spectrum of reasons why we eat what we eat. Young people have told us that the social context of food is particularly important to them. Food is a source of connection with family and friends.

The world around us shapes our opportunities to eat nutritious food

Where someone lives, the food spaces available in their community, and how friends and family interact with food are all significant factors in young people's lives and need to be considered when talking about food. Understanding this context can help us talk about food with sensitivity. Find more information on the determinants of health [here](#).

Why we eat:




Young people have told us





- Food such as takeaways can play a crucial role in their social and family life.
- Fast food restaurants are sometimes the only places available for young people to go and be in a safe environment.
- They are more likely to engage in cooking or healthy eating if their peers or family are involved.


Taking a fresh look..... at the context of food choices


The world around them affects students' food choices


 **Affordability.** Consider the variability of budgets and cost-of-living. Food that may be considered standard items by some families may not be within budget for others.


 **Food familiarity.** Some of the food discussed in the classroom may not be familiar to young people and their families.


 **Transport.** Lack of access to transport can affect availability of food and limit choices.

 **Family cooking skills.** Everybody has different levels of cooking skills and nutritional knowledge.


 **Future health.** Young people are generally more motivated by short term factors like taste and price of food than future health. Students have told us that their food choices are also influenced by how the food affects their appearance, e.g., skin, teeth, breath.

 **Material barriers.** Not having access to equipment such as a fridge, freezer or cooker restricts the ability to store and prepare food in some households.

 **Lack of control.** Students have varying levels of control and opportunity to make changes to the food bought and prepared in their household.

 **Personal choice/responsibility.** Young people have told us that they are aware of the amount of sugar in a fizzy drink, but this does not affect their choice to drink it. Making healthier choices requires taking the information and applying it to their own life circumstances.

Something for you and your class to consider:

 **Geographical barriers.** A **food desert** is an area with limited access to affordable, good quality and nutritious food. **Food swamps** are areas with more fast food outlets/takeaways and less places to buy fresh food. Students could map the food sources in their area.

Classroom strategies.....

Key messages



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- A balanced diet is the main goal, rather than a single nutrient or change.
- Move away from talking about specific foods as "good" or "bad".
- The way we speak about food is really important. We don't want to elevate or demonise food through our language so avoid terms such as "treat" or "cutting out".
- Focus on making small, healthy changes. A good starting point is to add one healthy and nutritious food such as salad to a sandwich or vegetables to a main meal such as chicken curry.
- Adding healthy food can be an easier place to start than cutting out unhealthy food, especially for girls who may be experiencing a culture of restrictive eating.
- Avoid classroom activities that might have the effect of creating a sense of shame or cause young people to compare body weights or shapes, such as food diaries, calorie counting, weighing students or talking about BMI. Take the focus off weight and focus on the value of food overall.
- Use words such as "healthy", "unhealthy", "calories" and "dieting" carefully, and be aware of the possible impact on your students.

Instead of

Try

"Foods that are good for you"	→	"Foods that we should eat every day"
"Foods that are bad for you"	→	"Foods we eat occasionally"
"That food is bad for you because it is high in sugar."	→	"That food is high in sugar so it would be good to have occasionally"
Treat	→	Food we enjoy
Talking about weight	→	Talking about creating healthy habits
Calories	→	Food that is nourishing
"What are we going to cut out?"	→	"What new foods are we going to try?"
Food diaries	→	Vignettes (character stories)
Giving an example of one specific food	→	Give a variety of examples
Junk food	→	Ultra processed foods that are high in fat, sugar, salt and calories
"Eat this amount to maintain weight"	→	"Eat a varied and balanced diet to promote good health."

Classroom strategies.....

Vignettes (character stories)

Vignettes are short sample stories that give a snapshot of a person's life. Vignettes allow you to create a character reflective of the students in your class, based on what they have told you and your own experience of the community.

Why?

By depersonalising the content, vignettes supports discussion about food without judgement or shame. The benefit of this is that students are not reflecting on their own behaviour. This removes the potential for stigma or shame and enables open exploration.

How?

Vignettes can be about an individual or group. They can be used to generate a discussion about the scenario presented or as a stimulus for meal choice exercises. You could ask your students to discuss a vignette and come up with advice for the character, or to create a meal plan based on a character's story.

Creating your own character stories

- Keep the vignette short and relate it to a specific problem or topic while making sure it includes enough to prompt discussion/advice.
- If using vignettes in meal planning, be realistic about the characters' context. It is important to avoid extremes as this can add an unintentional layer of judgement on the character.
- Use language that is familiar to students.
- Avoid naming vignette characters after anyone in your class.
- If possible, add images or a storyboard to make the vignettes more accessible. For example by using Canva.
- Make sure the characters in your vignette are reflective of your students context and experience.
- Check with your students to see if there is anything missing.
- Plan specific questions to guide discussion/activity.

Sample character story

Kasey woke up late for school. They were up late on their phone and slept in.

They didn't have time for breakfast before going to school. At break time Kasey has an energy drink to help stay awake.

Sample questions:

- What would help Kasey to get more energy?
- What changes could Kasey make?
- What advice would you give to Kasey?



Teacher prompts (try to use open ended questions):

- Do you think the energy drink is helping Kasey? Why?
- Do you think this will give Kasey energy for the whole day?
- What are some of the short term effects of drinking energy drinks? What are some of the long term effects?
- What other things could Kasey do to get more energy?