

Help to make your students healthier, happier and better learners.



All students deserve the opportunity to be happy, healthy and resilient.

Providing and promoting healthy food in your school plays an important role in supporting this.

The link between food, mood, and learning

We know that fuelling children with the appropriate foods helps support their growth and development. But there is a growing body of research showing that **what children eat can affect not only their physical health but also their mood, mental health and learning.**

The research suggests that eating a healthy and nutritious diet can improve mental health¹, enhance cognitive skills like concentration and memory^{2,3} and improve academic performance⁴.

Children should be eating plenty of nutritious, minimally processed foods from the five food groups:

- fruit
- vegetables and legumes/beans
- grains (cereal foods)
- lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans
- milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives

Consuming too many nutritionally-poor foods and drinks that are high in added fats, sugars and salt, such as lollies, chips and fried foods has been connected to emotional and behavioural problems in children and adolescents⁵. In fact, young people that have the unhealthiest diets are nearly **80% more likely** to have depression than those with the healthiest diets¹.

Why are schools an important place to make changes?

Schools can play a key role in influencing healthy eating habits, as students can consume on average 37% of their energy intake for the day during school hours alone!⁶

A New South Wales survey found that up to **72% of primary school students purchase foods and drinks from the canteen** at least once a week⁷. Also, in Victoria, while around three-quarters (77%) of children meet the guidelines for recommended daily serves of fruit, only one in 25 (4%) meet the guidelines for recommended daily serves of vegetables⁸; and discretionary foods account for nearly 40 per cent of energy intake for Victorian children⁹.

It's never too late to encourage healthier eating habits - childhood and adolescence is a key time to build lifelong habits and learn how to enjoy healthy eating.



Get started today

You can start to improve students' learning outcomes and mental wellbeing by promoting healthy eating throughout your school environment.

Some ideas to get you started:

- Have a healthy canteen menu in line with the [Schools Canteen and Other School Food Services Policy](#).
- Make sure water is freely available across your school, and allow students to have a water bottle with them in class.
- Plant a vegetable garden and use the produce you grow in cooking activities and at the canteen. Check out the [Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation](#) program for more ideas.
- Schedule 'brain food' breaks during the day to encourage students to eat fruit and vegetables in class.
- Engage all school staff to become positive role models — visibly taking care of their health by eating healthy foods and drinks at school.
- Use [non-food rewards in the classroom to help students develop healthy relationships between food and behaviour](#).
- Encourage parents to provide [healthier lunches](#).
- Source fresh produce from your local community, such as local markets and food growers.

“When kids eat a healthy diet with a wide variety of fruit and vegetables in that diet, they actually perform better in the classroom.

They're going to have better stamina with their work, and at the end of the day it means we'll get better learning results which will impact on them in the long term.”

Marlborough Primary School principal

¹ Jacka FN, et al. *Associations between diet quality and depressed mood in adolescents: results from the Australian Healthy Neighbourhoods Study*. Aust N Z J Psychiatry. 2010 May;44(5):435-42. <https://doi.org/10.3109/00048670903571598571598>

² Gómez-Pinilla, F. (2008). *Brain foods: The effects of nutrients on brain function*. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 9(7), 568-578. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2805706/>

³ Bellisle, F. (2004). *Effects of diet on behaviour and cognition in children*. British Journal of Nutrition, 92(2), S227–S232

⁴ Burrows, T., Goldman, S., Pursey, K., Lim, R. (2017) Is there an association between dietary intake and academic achievement: a systematic review. J Hum Nutr Diet. 30, 117– 140 doi: 10.1111/jhn.12407. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jhn.12407>

⁵ Jacka FN, Kremer PJ, Berk M, de Silva-Sanigorski AM, Moodie M, Leslie ER, et al. (2011) *A Prospective Study of Diet Quality and Mental Health in Adolescents*. PLoS ONE 6(9): e24805. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0024805>

⁶ Bell AC, Swinburn BA. What are the key food groups to target for preventing obesity and improving nutrition in schools? Eur J Clin Nutr 2004;58:258–63

⁷ Hardy L, King L, Espinel P, et al. NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (SPANS) 2010: Full Report (pg 97). Sydney: NSW Ministry of Health, 2011

⁸ Department of Education and Training 2019, *Child Health and Wellbeing Survey – Summary Findings 2017*, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

⁹ Department of Health and Human Services 2016, *Victoria's Health; the Chief Health Officer's report 2014*, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

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