

Food, mood & learning outcomes

Schools

Food plays an important role in ensuring students are happy, healthy and resilient.

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The link between food, mood and learning

We know that fuelling children with the appropriate foods helps support their growth and development.

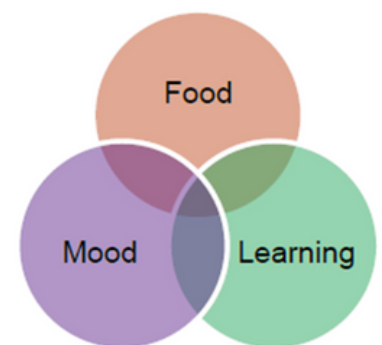
There is a growing body of research showing that what children eat not only affects their physical health but also their mood, mental health and learning.

The research suggests that eating a healthy and nutritious diet can improve mental health [1], enhance cognitive skills like concentration and memory [2,3] and improve academic performance [4].

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 (high in added fats, sugars and salt) such as lollies, chips and fried foods has been linked to emotional and behavioural problems in children and adolescents [5]. In fact, young people that have the unhealthiest diets are nearly 80% more likely to have depression than those with the healthiest diets [1].



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Why are schools important places 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]

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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 week [7].

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 vegetables [8]; and discretionary foods account for nearly 40 per cent of energy intake for Victorian children [9].

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.



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Get started today!

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

- Provide a healthy canteen menu in line with the [Canteens, Healthy Eating and Other Food Services Policy](#).
- Make sure water is freely available and allow students to have a water bottle in class.
- Plant a vegetable garden and use the produce in cooking activities and the canteen menu. 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 ([access our Healthy Lunchbox fact sheet here](#)).
- Source fresh produce from your local community, such as local markets and food growers.

References

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- 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
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