

What does Your Child See: Nutrition and Exercise?

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What does your child see as examples of nutrition and exercise?

Physical activity and eating behaviors are shaped by a variety of influences in our society including families, businesses, churches, community organizations, government agencies, health care providers, media, and schools. Our children learn from each of these influences by listening, doing, and watching.

Family influence

Family meals and food choices are very personal and individual to each family. The family has the strongest influence on student's eating behavior and physical activity. Organizing deliberate meals with good food choices sets an example for the child. Elementary children need to learn to eat a variety of foods. They do not have the ability to sort through all the food available. Parents need to screen the foods served so choices offer a quality diet.

A positive family attitude and an opportunity for sports and play, set a tone for incorporating physical activity into daily life. The families influence can never be underestimated!

Role models at School

Schools are particularly well positioned to play an important role in fighting the rising childhood obesity rate, because students spend a significant part of the day, and much of the year, in school. School personnel and parent volunteers have the opportunity to set an example with foods they eat in front of students and exercise habits. Many school districts are promoting staff wellness programs to help staff take good care of themselves and role model good health habits for students.

Schools can also model positive eating behavior in the use of food as student rewards and in parties. Many districts are adopting policies rewarding good behavior and academic success in non-food ways. Likewise, celebrations are taking a more creative turn, for example, celebrate a birthday with a new book read and donated to the class.

Influence of advertising

An addition influence on students is advertising. The School Health Policy and Program Study found that schools allowed food promotion or advertising to students. Of schools surveyed, 37% allowed advertising by the soft drink company in the building, 28% allowed advertising on school grounds, and 23% allowed promotion of products through

coupons. Researchers found a negative association between number of soft drink advertisement locations in the district and participation in school lunch. The study further found widespread existence of advertisements for soft drinks on high school campuses. Because young children are unduly influenced, the American Psychological Association Task Force on Advertising and Children recommends that advertising in all forms be restricted in school environments serving children eight years old and under.

Fundraisers with food are prevalent during the school day, during meal hours, and after school. Fundraisers also take the form of promoting and advertising to children. Researchers examined school participation in sponsorship, incentive, and fundraising and described potential health implications. Findings indicated that most schools (83% of primary and 85% of secondary) were involved in some sort of sponsorship, incentive, or fundraising initiative, some of which had the potential to have a negative impact on the health of students. Some partnerships delivered positive health messages, but others were linked to products or activities potentially harmful to health.

Take home message

Consider the role models in your student's life. Encourage your school to develop opportunities for positive role modeling in and outside the classroom.