

The essential guide



Welcome

Welcome to *School food: the essential guide*.

This resource has been developed to support the School food: top marks programme in Northern Ireland.

Its aim is to provide the inspiration, practical advice, and case studies to support all teachers, pupils, health professionals, caterers and others in promoting and implementing healthier eating and drinking in primary and post-primary schools.

If you are involved in promoting healthy eating and supporting the general health and wellbeing of children and the school community, you will find something here to help.

What's in the folder

- **The essential guide** introduces the programme and resource.



- **Establishing a whole school food policy** explains the whole school approach and takes you through creating your own policy.



The following booklets tackle the key school food and drinks topics and incorporate guidance on developing healthy eating policies and taking a whole school approach to food in schools.

- **Healthier breakfast clubs**



- **Healthier breaks**



- **Healthier vending**



- **Water provision**



- **Improving the dining experience in schools**



- **Healthier lunch boxes**



- **Cook and eat clubs**



- **Useful contacts** to help you access additional advice, support and resources.



Each booklet includes a curriculum links section.

The context for School food: the essential guide

School food: the essential guide has been developed to support the School food: top marks programme, which is a school food initiative by the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA).

In recognition of the important role of schools in contributing to childhood nutrition and to the development of the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to make healthier food choices, DE and DHSSPS are putting in place an overarching policy for all school food to provide direction on a range of strategies and plans to deliver improved nutrition for our school children.

In the context of the DHSSPS Fit Futures initiative, and the Public Service Agreement shared by DHSSPS, DE and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to stop the rise in obesity levels in children and young people, the new policy highlights the importance of a whole school approach to healthy eating and drinking.¹ It will also recognise the importance of nutrition in the early years of life and the Government's commitment to providing a range of initiatives promoting healthy eating in schools.

Current Government commitments to improve school food

- Publication of *School food: the essential guide*, providing a practical guide to support healthy eating in schools.
- Publication of *Nutritional standards for school lunches* and *Nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools*. Following a pilot project in around 100 schools in 2004, DE announced the roll-out of new nutritional standards for school lunches in September 2007. In April 2008 this was extended to include all food and drinks provided in schools. For further information go to www.deni.gov.uk
- DE funding of nutritional standards coordinators in each of the five education and library boards. The coordinators role is to train and provide practical support in implementing the nutritional standards for school food to catering staff and schools.
- Monitoring of the standards for school food by the Education and Training Inspectorate, which has appointed two nutritional associates to join inspection teams for special, primary and post-primary schools.

- DE and DHSSPS funding of a food in schools coordinator, a dietitian, based at the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA). The role of the post is to support and implement the initiatives of the School food: top marks programme.
- Recent research in over 90 schools to examine the perceptions and attitudes towards food in schools by pupils, parents, school staff and management and catering staff.
- Curriculum revisions that should ensure children and young people are provided with opportunities to obtain knowledge and understanding of nutrition and healthy eating and to develop skills in preparing and cooking food. The curriculum makes provision for nutrition and healthy eating to be included as part of personal development from Foundation stage to Key stage 4 and includes a requirement for all children to take home economics at Key stage 3 as a strand of 'Learning for life and work'. For further advice and guidance please contact the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) www.ccea.org.uk



What children and young people are eating

Most children in the UK have a diet that is too high in fat, sugar and salt.²

A survey of children's eating habits in Northern Ireland showed that nearly three quarters (73%) of children had biscuits daily, with half of all children eating confectionery (47%) and savoury snacks such as crisps (52%) at least once a day.³

Only 1 in 10 children (11%) achieved the target of five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, with one fifth (20%) not having any fruit or vegetables on a regular basis.³

Dental decay in children continues to be a significant public health problem in Northern Ireland, with three fifths (61%) of five year olds showing signs of dental decay compared to the UK average of 43%.⁴ The main cause of tooth decay is related to the frequency and amount of sugars consumed in both foods and drinks.⁵

According to recent studies, the main source of non-milk extrinsic sugar or added sugar in the diet is soft drinks, sugar, preserves and confectionery, especially chocolate.^{2,3,5}

Why change is needed

Nutrition is central to health, and children's diet can be an important influence on their health now and in the future. Good nutrition in childhood can therefore help protect against chronic diseases in later life.

Cardiovascular disease and cancer are Northern Ireland's biggest killers.⁶ International research shows that diets rich in fruit and vegetables are protective against cardiovascular disease, including heart disease and stroke.^{7,8}

Poor diet and unhealthy lifestyles can contribute to cancer deaths and may be responsible for up to a third of all cancer deaths.⁹

Obesity significantly increases the risk of developing coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer and type 2 diabetes. There are concerns about the rising levels of overweight and obesity in children and young people.

In Northern Ireland obesity levels in children are increasing, with nearly a quarter (22%) of all children starting primary school being classed as overweight or obese.¹⁰

Recent studies which measured children's weight and height at home and in primary school suggested that this figure remains steady with age and is likely to increase rather than decrease.^{11,12}

Your school can make a difference

All over Northern Ireland improvements in healthy eating have been taking place as a result of:

- the introduction of nutritional standards for school lunches and other food and drinks in schools;
- healthy break policies in many primary schools;
- a stronger emphasis on healthy eating in all schools.

The nutritional standards ensure there is more fruit and vegetables available, that free fresh drinking water is accessible and that many high fat and deep fried foods are restricted. In addition, schools are not now permitted to serve high fat, sugar and salted snacks such as crisps, sweets, chocolate and sugary drinks. These have been replaced with healthier choices such as fruit, bread based snacks, milk and water.

The eating habits of primary school children are changing. A recent Northern Ireland survey in primary schools found an increase in the numbers of children meeting the 5 a day target (28%), and a decrease in the number of children not having any fruit or vegetables on a regular basis (7%). Similarly, there was a small decrease in the number of children eating biscuits, sweets, chocolates, crisps and fizzy drinks.¹¹

Another survey looking at the behaviour and attitudes of 11-16 year olds in Northern Ireland found that over 80% were being taught about healthy eating at school and that they felt there was a good choice of healthy food available in schools.¹³

Although there is still a long way to go to for children and young people to achieve a healthy balanced diet, your school can make a huge difference.

As children spend on average a quarter of their waking lives in school, one big step to improving their nutrition is to offer and promote healthy food and drink choices during the school day.

Your school environment, the attitudes of staff and pupils, as well as what children learn in the classroom, will all have a major influence on their knowledge and understanding of health. If you encourage children to enjoy healthy food and drinks early on, it is much more likely that you will reinforce positive behaviours that will remain with them throughout life.

What is a healthy diet?

The eatwell plate makes healthy eating easier to understand by showing the types and proportions of foods that make a healthy and well balanced diet.



Children aged five or over should try to eat the following.

Plenty of fruit and vegetables; aim for five portions of fruit and vegetables a day: fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or juiced.

Plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods like breakfast cereals and noodles. Choose wholegrain varieties wherever you can. Starchy foods should make up a third of our daily food intake.

Some milk and dairy foods as they are good sources of protein, vitamin A, B12 and calcium. Try to look for low-fat products.

Moderate amounts of meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein. They are good sources of protein and they also provide vitamins and minerals, especially iron, vitamin D and B12. Some types of meat are high in fat so it is best to choose a lean cut, remove skin or rind and try not to add oil or fry.

Just a small amount of foods and drinks high in fat or sugar or both.

More information is available at www.eatwell.gov.uk

Linking with other school programmes

School food: top marks encourages schools to look at providing healthy food and drinks through a whole school approach, and through developing healthy eating policies and ensuring that links are made with the curriculum.

The healthy schools and extended schools initiatives share common aims and approaches to supporting children's health, safety and wellbeing both with each other and with the School food: top marks programme. *School food: the essential guide* works in tandem with these programmes, providing examples for schools to meet many of the criteria involved in becoming a healthy or extended school.

Extended schools

An extended school is one that provides a range of services and activities, sometimes during or beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community.

Extended schools work within an outcomes framework that provides the basis for action planning. One of the five (high level) outcome areas in this framework is 'Being healthy'.

Almost 500 schools and 120,000 pupils have participated during the first two years of the extended schools programme. The funding provided by the programme has resulted in 141 schools now operating breakfast clubs, with schools reporting that children are more alert in class and have increased attention spans. Schools also report that pupils are more settled when arriving in class and attendance and behavioural patterns have improved. This enables better pupil concentration on lessons and enhanced learning for pupils about the importance of healthy eating.

Under the programme 84 schools now also provide healthy breaks, which encourage children to bring in fruit, milk or water. Early reports on the healthy breaks element of the programme are similar to those outlined above. For further information go to www.deni.gov.uk

Healthy schools

A healthy school is one in which the board of governors, staff, members of the wider community and relevant agencies work together in a planned way to promote the health of everyone in the school by developing policies, practices and structures to underpin a sustainable programme of action.

A healthy school adopts a process of self-evaluation and action planning against a set of internationally recognised and tested quality criteria which aim to improve school health and wellbeing in relation to the three key elements of work for a healthy school, which are:

- ethos and environment
- quality of learning and teaching
- quality of management.

These key elements are closely linked to educational policies for school improvement.

The approach to becoming a healthy school is outlined in a toolkit which takes schools step by step through a simple process of audit and self assessment to develop their action plans, helping them rate where they are, and benchmark their progress. For further information and to download the healthy schools toolkit please go to www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk



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