

Being a Role Model for School Wellness



HOW CAN YOU BE A ROLE MODEL

The opportunity to serve as a role model of healthy eating and physical activity behaviors to your students awaits you. The period of adolescence is a time when many young people may be making decisions that will affect the rest of their lives.

Do your students see you eat nutritious foods?

Your food choices affect your health-how you feel today, tomorrow, and in the future. Are you making smart choices at each meal? Are you getting the most nutrition out of your calories? The best way for you to encourage healthy eating is to eat well yourself. Kids will follow the lead of the adults they see every day. If you regularly snack on foods such as donuts and sodas, you can't expect youth around you to make more healthful choices. By snacking on smarter choices such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or lowfat milk and milk products, and not overindulging in foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, and added sugars, you'll be sending the right message!

Do your students see you being physically active?

Experts recommend that adults get at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. For children and adolescents, it's at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. There are plenty of ways to get physical activity on your own or with friends. These include biking, running, swimming, dancing, in-line skating, hiking and walking quickly. And don't forget that even small things can count as physical activity, like raking leaves or doing yard work. Even walking your dog counts! Physical activity can even help you to feel better emotionally as well as physically. One of the great things about being physically active is that it is never too late to start!

Do you provide information to parents about safe recreation centers or after-school programs in your area?

One of the challenges parents face is feeling they must keep kids inside because it's not safe for them to be physically active outside. Or they feel they have to drive their children to school because it's not safe for them to walk or bike to school. You can help by providing information to parents on safe environments in their communities where students can be physically active, or how they can find safe routes to allow youth to walk or bike to school. You may help to alleviate parental fears, while helping to get youth engaged in physical activity.

Do you encourage your students to eat breakfast and lunch?

Breakfast and lunch may help kids to concentrate and learn and may also help to keep them going through the day. Research suggests that not having breakfast can affect children's intellectual performance. The percentage of young people who eat breakfast decreases with age; while 92% of children ages 6-11 eat breakfast, only 75-78% of adolescents ages 12-19 report eating breakfast. Encourage students to eat breakfast and lunch instead of skipping meals or relying on nutrient-poor options that are high in saturated fat, trans fat and added sugars.

Do you incorporate nutrition messages into the curriculum you are teaching?

Talk with students about the importance of healthy food and physical activity choices and how these can help their bodies stay healthy. Identify ways to include nutrition information into reading, math, science and other subjects. For example, the role of private food company advertisements in public schools might be a good topic for class discussions. But keep in mind that simply informing youth about the importance of daily physical activity and healthy eating does not mean they will adopt these behaviors. An environment that supports these choices, motivation and reinforcement for engaging in these behaviors, and role models who provide encouragement are also important for students.

Do you use food as a reward in your classroom or programs?

Establishing healthy student attitudes towards eating requires that staff not use food as an incentive: either as a punishment (such as withholding treats other students are receiving) or as a reward. Research indicates that young children's food preference patterns are largely influenced by repeated exposure to food and the social context in which food is offered. Positive or negative emotions associated with the setting and type of food offered or restricted may have long-lasting effects on students' food preferences. A common practice is for teachers and others to give students candy as a reward. When it comes to rewarding students, providing non-food incentives is a more productive approach. Providing extra time for games or physical activity or allowing students to accumulate points toward prizes or a special off-site event are some examples of non-food rewards.