



CAFETERIA NUDGES

What is a Nudge?

A nudge is an environmental cue or structure that influences people to behave in a certain way. Many small, undetectable nudges influence our behavior every day: some planned, like the decision to hold recess before lunch, and others seemingly random, like the order of food items on the cafeteria line. Each of these decisions about how places, programs, or policies are designed has great potential to nudge people towards healthier behaviors.

Getting children to choose healthy foods can be challenging. Food service staff can use inexpensive strategies described in this toolkit to create cafeteria environments that promote healthy foods, thereby influencing students to select healthier lunch options.

Are You a Choice Architect?

Yes, you are! A choice architect is anyone who influences the context in which choices are made. In the school cafeteria, food service staff make many decisions and act in ways that influence student eating, whether they intend to or not. No cafeteria is designed neutrally. A food service director may arrange food so that the healthiest foods come first and are at eye-level, arrange food randomly, or arrange food to maximize profits. All of these designs, or choice architectures, influence students' behaviors in the lunch line.

Most children do not eat enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk products; and eat too much solid fat, added sugars and sodium. Food environments, like the school cafeteria, play an important role in a child's eating behavior. They give cues as to what, when, and how to eat which has implications for children's own eating preferences and behaviors. Food environments can be used to encourage children to eat more healthfully.

Because of their role working with students in the cafeteria, food service staff have substantial influence over the eating behaviors of students. Cost and time constraints, children's preferences for familiar foods, and other barriers may make providing lots of healthy food options difficult. However, food service staff can use the tools and strategies in this toolkit to promote fruit, vegetable, and whole grain consumption among students and to improve the cafeteria nutrition environment. These changes can be simple, affordable, and sustainable.

For more information on the concepts of nudging and choice architecture, see Thaler & Sunstein's bestselling book about behavioral economics. Thaler, R.H., & Sunstein, C.R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New York: Knopf.

CHOOSING NUDGES FOR THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA

You and your partners know which changes will be the most feasible in your school, given factors like available staff and equipment, costs, and layout. The following sections can help your team choose the nudges or think of new ideas that you can implement in your school.

Your team can also assess needs and opportunities for improvement in schools using the Cafeteria Nutrition **Environment Observation and the Student-Staff Interactions Observation tools** (see the EVALUATION Section).



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Implementing Nudges in the School Cafeteria



Lighting

- Use warm lighting to give the cafeteria a gourmet feel.
- Use spotlights to highlight healthy food items like fruits and vegetables.

Line layout

- *PLACE HEALTHY ITEMS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE LINE. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT FOODS APPEARING FIRST IN THE LINE ARE CHOSEN MORE OFTEN.*
- Place healthy items next to the cash register. Because of the bottleneck that often happens near the register, students have time to consider buying something extra. Place healthy extras like fruit or milk near the register. Move salad bars next to the register.
- *MAKE HEALTHY VEGETABLE AND FRUIT OFFERINGS THE "DEFAULT" SIDE DISHES AND MAKE LESS HEALTHY SIDE DISHES AVAILABLE BY REQUEST. STUDENTS WILL OFTEN TAKE THE FOODS THAT ARE AUTOMATICALLY GIVEN TO THEM AND FEW WILL REQUEST A DIFFERENT SIDE.*
- Put chocolate and strawberry milk behind the plain milk.
- Place desserts and other less healthy foods out of sight. Making these items available only by request will improve sales of healthy items in sight. Keep ice cream in freezers without glass display tops.

Displays

- Display healthy foods more prominently and at students' eye-level. Make sure the healthiest options can be easily seen and reached by students of all sizes.
- Use baskets, crates, or other attractive containers for apples, oranges, and other whole fruit. These containers give the food more appeal than stainless steel bins.
- Use brightly colored fabrics featuring healthy foods to give displays warmth.

- Create a healthy tray model. Show and tell students entering the line what the day's most healthy meal looks like.
- *DISPLAY A MENU BOARD THAT DESCRIBES WHAT FOODS, INCLUDING SIDES, ARE AVAILABLE EACH DAY. ADD STICKERS, DECALS, OR PICTURES TO THE BOARD TO FEATURE HEALTHY SELECTIONS.*

Signage

- Use colorful posters and other images promoting healthy foods in the lines and around the cafeteria.
- Highlight the nutritional quality of specific foods directly connected to the nutrition messages taught in the classroom.
- *USE TABLE TENT CARDS TO DESCRIBE FOODS, FOOD FACTS, OR OTHER INFORMATION OR MESSAGES. WRITE FOOD NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS ON GLASS SNEEZE GUARD.*
- Paint a mural depicting healthy foods and behaviors in the cafeteria.
- Market healthy foods served in the cafeteria using appealing photographs of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy options. Recruit the services of a local photographer, art teacher, or student group to promote a specific food and its healthful characteristics.
- *PARTNER WITH THE ART DEPARTMENT TO DEVELOP A STUDENT ART ASSIGNMENT WHICH EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY FOODS.*

Service methods

- Serve desserts and snacks by request only instead of displaying them on the line.
- Have a line without less healthy à la carte items.
- Package healthy items in a unique and attractive container or manner.

Environment

- Use seating in isolated areas of the café as a reward for a week's worth of healthy selections (e.g., music, noise-free, teacher tables, VIP tables, manners zone).



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NUDGE WITH FOOD

Colors, textures, and shapes

- OFFER A VARIETY OF CHOICES EACH DAY. NOT ALL STUDENTS WILL LIKE A SPECIFIC FRUIT OR VEGETABLE. INCREASING THE VARIETY OF AVAILABLE ITEMS EVERY DAY MAY INCREASE THE CHANCE THAT STUDENTS WILL SELECT A FRUIT AND VEGETABLE.

- Train staff on fruit and vegetable preparation and display. Foods that are fun, easy to eat, and look appealing are more likely to be selected. In order to retain color and flavor, do not overcook vegetables. Use herbs or garnishes to make food look appealing. Cut food into fun shapes. Display food in attractive serving containers that allow children to see the food.

Fun food facts

- Include age appropriate nutrition messages in food signage.
- Display a poster describing a food's life cycle from seed to selection.
- POST FUN FACTS ABOUT THE FRUITS, VEGETABLES, AND GRAINS SERVED.

Food specials

- OFFER SPECIAL, CUSTOM ITEMS LIKE MAKE-YOUR-OWN SUBS AND WRAPS IN A QUICK LINE.
- Offer healthy "limited availability" lunches by creating a lunch that only is available by special order.
- Offer a limited availability, "cooked from scratch" menu item that is made 100% on site by your staff.
- FEATURE LOCAL FOODS. CREATE BRAND LOYALTY FOR LOCAL FOODS.
- Offer small tastings of new foods. By offering students the chance to taste new healthy foods while they wait in line, students may choose these foods as part of their lunches.

- IDENTIFY FAVORITE FOODS OF TEACHERS OR STAFF. IF STUDENTS KNOW THEIR FAVORITE TEACHER'S FAVORITE FRUIT IS APPLES, THEY MAY BE MORE INCLINED TO SELECT IT.

Fun and descriptive names

- Create a fun theme (e.g., around the world) for menu items. Apply the theme to lunch offerings through menu item names.
- GIVE HEALTHY FOODS FUN AND DESCRIPTIVE NAMES, LIKE LEAN MEAN GREEN BEANS. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT DESCRIPTIVE NAMES INCREASE SALES AND STUDENTS PERCEIVE THE FOOD AND THE CAFETERIA MORE POSITIVELY.

(Wansink, van Ittersum, & Painter, 2005)



SEE HOW STUDENTS ENJOY...

X-RAY VISION CARROTS
 POWER PEAS
 GLOW-IN-THE-DARK GREENS
 DINOSAUR BROCCOLI TREES
 BANANA RAMAS
 TOMATO BURSTS
 GOLDEN PIRATES CORN
 APPLE CRUNCHERS
 CELERY SWORDS
 MIGHTY MELON
 JUMPING BEANS
 RAZZLE DAZZLE BERRY
 SUPER GROUPER VEGGIES
 BANDIT BEANS
 MIXED UP FRUIT CUP
 MONSTER MASHED POTATOES
 SNOW WHITE'S APPLESAUCE





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3.

NUDGE WITH PEOPLE

Scripts and prompting

- *PROMPT STUDENTS TO SELECT HEALTHY OPTIONS. INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR STUDENTS TO REQUEST HEALTHY ITEMS, ASK THEM IF THEY WOULD LIKE TO HAVE THE VEGETABLE AND FRUIT SELECTIONS. VERBAL PROMPTING INCREASES THE SELECTION AND CONSUMPTION OF TARGETED FOODS SIGNIFICANTLY. (SEE HANDOUT FOR SCRIPTS TO PROMPT STUDENTS' HEALTHY FOOD SELECTION).*
- Praise students' healthy selections. When food service staff, teachers, and volunteers see students who have made healthy selections, reinforce the importance of healthy choices with praise.
- Role model healthy eating. When adults tell students how much they like fruits, vegetables, and other healthy selections, students will take notice. Adults can try to eat lunch offerings with the students or tell students how much they enjoyed the items being offered.

Service methods

- Invite visiting chefs to prepare school lunch recipes and do demonstrations during lunch.
- *INVITE A GUEST SERVER TO SERVE LUNCH IN THE CAFETERIA. HAVE STUDENTS SELECT A TEACHER OR OTHER SPECIAL GUEST TO SERVE HEALTHY LUNCH OPTIONS ONCE PER WEEK.*
- Have regular taster sessions for parents and students/pupils, and encourage young people to try a little of something new, whenever possible.

Appearances, attitudes, and attention

- Provide staff with chef uniforms. Students will perceive the food as more special and tasty.

- Greet students using their names.
- *CONSIDER CARRYING OUT A SURVEY ACROSS THE SCHOOL TO UNDERSTAND THE FOOD THEY ENJOY AND WHAT OPTIONS THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE ON FUTURE MENUS. THE SERVICE WILL BENEFIT GREATLY BY HAVING REGULAR FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS/PUPILS.*

Send home messages and reinforcements

- Provide letters to send home that help students tell their parents what new fruits, vegetables, and whole grains they are trying during lunch.
- *USE WEB OR CELLULAR COMMUNICATIONS TO SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT MENUS, TARGETED FOODS, AND STUDENTS' SELECTIONS WITH PARENTS.*
- Send home fruit, vegetable, and whole grain selection "report cards" detailing student lunch choices.
- *DEVELOP A HEALTHY BUDDY SYSTEM FOR STUDENTS TO CHECK IN WITH A PEER TO SHARE HEALTHY CHOICES.*

Promote nutrition throughout the school

- *INCLUDE ANNOUNCEMENTS ABOUT NUTRITION OR HEALTHY LUNCH FEATURES DURING THE MORNING ANNOUNCEMENTS. ANNOUNCEMENTS WRITTEN OR DELIVERED WITH THE HELP OF STUDENTS WILL BE ESPECIALLY WELL-LIKED. THE REFRESH CURRICULUM INCLUDES MANY ANNOUNCEMENTS TO CHOOSE FROM.*
- Play video skits created by students to promote fruit and vegetable choices in the cafeteria.
- Assemble and play a photo slideshow on the school's electronic bulletin boards of students doing healthy behaviors and featured healthy lunch choices.



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4. NUDGE WITH INCENTIVES

Non-monetary incentives

- *START A HEALTHY FOODS PASSPORT OR FREQUENT DINERS' PROGRAM. HAVE STUDENTS STAMP A PASSPORT WHEN THEY SELECT FRUITS, VEGETABLES, OR WHOLE GRAINS IN THEIR LUNCHESES. STUDENTS COMPLETING THE PASSPORT RECEIVE A SMALL (NON-FOOD) PRIZE.*
- Give small incentives for fruit, vegetable, and grain selection. Provide students with a sticker or other small prize for selecting these foods during lunch. Consider adding a chart to track students' choices or add a competitive element to the incentives.
- *ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO TRY NEW FOODS. OFFER "I TRIED IT!" STICKERS TO STUDENTS WHO SELECT AND TASTE A NEW FOOD.*
- Play a "lucky tray" game in which food service staff place a sticker underneath one tray. If the student with the sticker has chosen a healthy lunch, they can receive a small prize.
- Hold a raffle. Offer a raffle entry to students for each fruit and vegetable they select. Give away a small prize that promotes healthy eating.

- *OFFER LUNCH WITH THE PRINCIPAL. USE TIME WITH THE PRINCIPAL OR OTHER STAFF AS A REWARD FOR STUDENTS MAKING HEALTHY SELECTIONS. BE SURE THE LUNCH HOST ROLE MODELS HEALTHY CHOICES, TOO!*
- Include a nutrition award at the annual school-wide awards ceremony.

Price incentives

- Raise the prices on less healthy foods.
- *LOWER THE PRICES ON HEALTHY FOODS LIKE FRESH FRUIT.*

Payment strategies

- Accept only cash for the less healthy à la carte snacks and desserts.



REMEMBER...

...nudges can be implemented anywhere in the school environment and anytime during the day. Take every opportunity to nudge. Nudge before school with cafeteria marketing material sent home with children or posted on your web site. Nudge before and during lunch with

messages enticing students to select healthy food options. Nudge throughout the day in the classroom, hallways, and cafeteria. Nudge after school with send-home items or other methods of communication to reinforce messages children learn at school.