

FAQ: How to redirect negative conversations about food

Negative talk around food can range from simply expressing dislike (“yuck! I hate spinach!”) to making big, extreme statements that are based on diet culture (“I’m not going to eat that, it has too many carbs”). These comments may be a warning sign about a child’s relationship with food and/or their body. They can also negatively impact those around them.

As a teacher or staff member, you can lead by example. Ensure your conversations around food are consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines (www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines). For example:

- avoid talking about food as good or bad or even healthy or unhealthy
- focus on positive learning experiences about foods from the five food groups. For example, talk about how foods grow or are made; what colours, smells, flavours and textures they have, how you can cook with them and so on.



Redirect the conversation

Milder comments, such as a student saying that they don’t like a food or think a food is ‘yucky’ can sometimes be ignored. Alternatively, you may be able to redirect the conversation. If these comments visibly impact on other students, especially if they are repeated or emphasised, you could try saying “it’s okay not to like a food, but did you know that you sometimes have to try a food lots of times before you start to like it?” If children need to express themselves, ask them to be descriptive instead of using negative words like yucky or hate.

Redirect the focus

Some children might pay particular attention to ‘sometimes’ foods included in another child’s lunchbox. If this happens, you could redirect the focus by asking the child if they ever eat the food/s at home, or whether they enjoy eating it too. With younger children, you could try talking about other qualities the food has (smooth, crunchy, brown...).

Move Well Eat Well

Negative comments about others' lunches

If a child is making negative comments about another child's lunch, it's best to bring a stop to this quickly. You might like to point out that we all like different things, have different family food traditions, and wouldn't life be boring if we were all the same? You could make an example of their favourite sport – even if it's not the same as your favourite, that doesn't make it bad, and it would probably make them unhappy if you were to pick on them for liking it. Reinforce that it is okay to not like the same food, but we need to be polite at mealtimes and not make comments about what other people are eating.

Comments about diets

Comments about food restriction or dieting can be quite dangerous. If you hear these, try to gently correct the student and, if possible, remind them of concepts they have been learning in class. Remind them that all foods have a place and eating a variety of different foods helps us to get what we need to grow, learn and play. There are lots of places that children can pick up on these ideas and, depending on the age of the child, it may be worth having a conversation about where their comments are coming from.

Concerns about a child

If you have concerns about a child's relationship with food and/or their body, it's a good idea to seek support early. You may be able to speak with the child's parents or get input from a psychologist or social worker at your school. Alternatively, the Butterfly Foundation has a free and confidential national helpline staffed by qualified mental health professionals. You can contact them on 1800 334 673.

