

Mindful Eating Lesson Plan

(Grades 4 and up)

Overview

Students will explore the concept of mindfulness and will have the opportunity to participate in a mindful eating activity.

Mindful eating is noticing how, what, where, when and why we eat. Practicing this skill helps us to understand how we feel, and how that can affect the food choices we make. Mindful eating connects physical, emotional and mental well-being, and increases awareness of the social and environmental factors influencing eating habits.

A mindful eating approach can also be used during any eating opportunity, including lunchtime, snacks and any classroom lesson plan that involves food tasting.

For lesson plans that use food, refer to our list of lesson plans [here](#).

Estimated time: 40-50 minutes

Food costs: less than \$5

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will

- Practice mindful eating by using senses to explore food.
- Discuss barriers to eating mindfully at school.
- Brainstorm solutions that support mindful eating at school.
- Implement ideas that help create a positive mealtime environment.

Materials

- (Grades 4-8) Mystery food can: instructions to make are found [here](#)
- Mystery food item: bring enough food to place inside the can (see Learning Activity 1) and for the entire class to try at least 2 pieces (see Learning Activity 3). Examples include dried fruit, apple chips and roasted chickpeas. Check for allergies when selecting the food item.
- Napkins (if required)
- Mindful Eating Student Worksheet
- Teacher Background: “Mindful Eating”



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Procedure

Learning Activity 1: Mystery Food Can (Grades 4-8)

- a. Place the mystery food in the can. Divide students into groups of 3-5. Guide the exploration by having one student at a time put a hand into the mystery food can and touch the food without looking inside. After each student within a group has touched the mystery food item, ask the group of students one question to help identify the food. Continue this procedure with the rest of the groups until all students have touched the mystery food item and each group has been asked one question to help identify the food.

Questions could be about the size, shape, texture, sound, temperature, etc. of the mystery food. Students could also be asked to guess the colour (inside and outside), flavour, or other properties of the food (e.g. Where does it grow: on a tree, a bush, or underground?).

- b. After every group has had a turn, ask the class to identify the food. Remove it from the can for everyone to see. Ask the class:
 - How did you identify the mystery food? (using your senses, past experience with the food)
 - What are the first things you usually notice about a food item? (appearance, color, smell, like/dislike)

Learning Activity 2: Principles of Mindfulness and Mindful Eating

- a. Begin by asking the class: Has anyone ever heard of mindfulness? If so, what is it?
 - Mindfulness is focusing on being in the present moment—noticing our thoughts, our feelings and our actions without any judgement. With this awareness, over time, your thoughts, feelings and actions can change.

Today we are going to explore mindful eating. Mindful eating can help us enjoy food more, understand our bodies better, and improve positive feelings about ourselves.

One way to eat mindfully is to pay attention to the experience of eating using our senses. Even one mindful bite can change our experience of a food or a meal.

- b. On the board, list or draw the 5 Senses for Mindful Eating with the help of the students (see below). Engage the class in a brief interactive discussion of how each sense could play a role in the process of mindful eating, connecting the students' experiences with the mystery food. For high school students, this will be a very brief discussion, but do not skip it.

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5 Senses for Mindful Eating:

1. Look - colour, size, texture and shape. Does it look appetizing?
 2. Smell - provides the first clues to taste
 3. Taste - flavour(s): salty, sweet, sour, bitter, savory, etc. Do they change over time?
 4. Touch - texture, moisture, temperature
 5. Listen x2 - to the sounds made by the food and also listen to your body (Are you hungry? Thirsty? Full?)
- c. Optional class debrief—Ask the class: Do you use all your senses when you are eating at lunch? Start to think about why or why not.

Learning Activity 3: Mindful Eating Opportunity

- a. Allow the students to put into practice what they have just learned. Have everyone **wash their hands**, including the food handler. Pass out the mystery food item (2 pieces per student) on a napkin, and ask that no one eat the items before you begin the activity as a class.

Some students may not want to taste the food used for this activity. They can still practice using their senses to explore the food in a mindful way. Let students know it is their choice to eat—or not eat—the food item, and they can still participate in most of the activity.

- b. First, have each student who would like to participate eat **one** piece of the food just as they normally would. For the **second** piece of food, take students through a mindful eating exercise using the following script:

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- *This activity is an example of really being “in the moment” while eating.*
- *I’d like everyone to sit up in your chairs, with your back straight but not too stiff. Keep your feet planted firmly on the ground. Notice your breathing. Let’s take a deep breath together...in...and out...*
- *Hold the food in your hand. Without talking out loud, answer the following questions in your mind.*
 - *What do you notice? What shape is it? What colour is it?*
 - *Squeeze the food between your fingers. What sound does it make?*
 - *How does it feel in your hand? What is the texture like?*
- *Now, if you feel comfortable, please close your eyes.*
- *Hold the food up to your nose and smell it. What do you notice?*
- *If you’d like to, you can put the food in your mouth.*
- *Don’t chew on it yet. Let it sit on your tongue and notice how it feels. (Only do this step if it is appropriate with your mystery food.)*
- *Slowly start to chew on the food. What is the flavour? Is there more than one flavour? How does it change as you chew it longer? What is the texture like now?*
- *Chew the food as many times as you can. Notice how the flavour and texture continue to change.*
- *If you’d like to, go ahead and swallow the food. Notice how it feels in your throat when you swallow it.*
- *Now you can open your eyes.*

c. Ask the students:

- What details did you notice during this activity (that you normally wouldn’t have)? Review the senses and compare how the first piece was experienced compared to the second (mindful) one.
- How did you feel when taking time to slow down and notice the food?

Note: Students might be impatient during the mindful eating exercise and express that they “don’t like” mindful eating. Acknowledge to the class that this exercise is very slow, so there is enough time to try practicing each step. When eating mindfully at a meal or snack, it does not need to take this long. The goal of mindful eating is to simply notice our senses, thoughts, and overall experience of eating. **Even taking one mindful bite can change the experience of a meal.**

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Learning Activity 4: Barriers and Solutions to Support Mindful Eating During the School Day

- a. First, as a class, brainstorm influences that affect **what** we eat and **how** we eat during the school day. Discuss both internal influences (such as hunger/fullness, mood, food preferences, philosophy/religion) and external influences (such as food available, cost, time available, peer influence, perception of foods as healthy/trendy, food skills, eating environment).
- b. Explain: Since the eating environment has an influence on how and what we eat, another way to eat mindfully is to create a calm and positive eating environment. Eating is an important and essential event that happens every day, and together we will discuss how to improve our school environment to support mindful eating.
- c. Grades 4-7: Divide the class into 6 groups. Give each group a Mindful Eating Student Worksheet; assign two groups to discuss each of the three questions (as seen below). Students will reflect on their own experiences of meals and snacks at school and will have about 5–7 minutes to share with their group and write them down. Grade 8+: Students can answer all three questions in small groups or individually. Remind students to use their senses and the **5 W's** (who, what, when, where and why) when describing their experiences.
 1. Here at school, can you describe the eating environment at lunchtime? Ask your students probing questions, such as: Where do you eat? Who do you eat with? Is it busy or calm? Do you take time to enjoy your food?
 2. What are at least three reasons we don't eat mindfully at lunch or when having a snack? (no time, habits of eating quickly, people judging each other's food, busy environment, distractions at meals, technology)
 3. What are at least three ways we can make eating lunch an important event and remind ourselves to eat mindfully at school?
 - I. Some ideas to help get the class started: take a deep breath before starting a meal, make a sign on our desk (see extension activity 3), have a mindful eating buddy, eat our first bite mindfully, don't make judgemental comments about food, share information about mindful eating with whoever helps pack our lunch, turn off technology, give thanks to the farmers and cooks before meals, make a class poster about eating mindfully, etc.
 - II. Record the students' ideas on the board for part e.

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- d. Have each group share their answers with the rest of the class. Invite students from the other groups to share answers for each question as well.
- e. Grades 4-7: As a class, choose one idea from question 3 to put into practice. Make a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) goal and write it on the board or somewhere visible. Discuss what barriers there are to making this change and find ways to address those barriers. Set a timeline and check in when you reach that date. For Grade 8 and up, students can create individual goals.

Lesson Wrap-up

Ask students:

1. What are two ways we explored mindful eating today?
 - a. Through sensory exploration of food and when creating a positive mealtime environment.
2. Why is mindful eating important?
 - a. It can help us slow down and focus on the food we are eating, which can create a more enjoyable eating experience.
 - b. It can help us understand our bodies better and improve positive feelings about ourselves.
3. How are we going to make eating at lunch an important (and mindful) event every day?
 - a. Review Activity 4e.

Extension

1. Repeat the Mindful Eating Exercise (Learning Activity 3) with other foods. Consider using two foods that differ from one another in flavour and texture (e.g. banana and roasted chickpeas). How are they different from one another? How are they similar? Be sure to check for any food allergies before beginning this activity as a class.
2. Complete a guided meditation as a class. There are several free apps offering high quality pre-recorded meditations. (See Links and Resources for more information.)

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3. Grades 4-6: Create mindful eating placemats: Allow each student to design their own personal placemat for meals as a cue to eat mindfully; visuals could include representations of the senses, or aspects of a positive eating environment.
4. Grades 7+: Assign students a mindful eating exercise to try at home. Have them complete a short journal reflection on the experience. Some prompts to consider are:
 - Describe how this meal or snack was different from your usual routine.
 - How did you feel before the meal or snack?
 - How did you feel after eating the meal or snack mindfully?

Teacher Backgrounder

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness, in a general sense, is the act of being aware and focused on the present moment, and approaching this awareness with curiosity, non-judgement, and self-compassion. It can be used as a tool to observe wandering thoughts and gently refocus the mind. While it does have traditional roots in spirituality, present day mindfulness as a modern psychological concept is not directly associated with any specific spiritual or religious practice¹.

How does mindfulness apply to eating behaviours?

Mindful eating is a term that applies the principles of mindfulness to food and the process of eating, by guiding the participant to:

- Use all of the senses to consciously select and enjoy foods that are both health-supporting and satisfy our hunger.
- Acknowledge the physical and emotional response to specific foods (whether positive, negative or neutral) and the general experience of eating without judgement.
- Develop awareness of the internal and external (i.e., portion size, lunch bell) influences on our food choices and eating habits, and to identify physical hunger and fullness cues as they arise.

Mindful eating is not:

- A weight loss strategy
- A quick way to start eating less
- A method to criticize food choices
- An unhealthy preoccupation with food

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Why focus on mindful eating in the classroom?

Infants are born with the natural ability to know when they are hungry and when they are full. However, as they grow up, factors such as expectations of appetite from adults or distractions while eating can interfere with their innate ability to regulate hunger and satiety. Practicing mindful eating connects physical, emotional, and mental well-being, as well as increases awareness of the social and environmental factors influencing eating habits. Despite widespread support for the principles that good nutrition is important for healthy growth and development, and well-nourished children are better learners², eating times at school are too short and often chaotic. Lunch is a missed learning opportunity: a chance to enjoy food, nourish ourselves and build social skills in a pleasant atmosphere.

Research has shown a positive relationship between mindful eating and overall mental well-being³—an increasingly important priority for children and adults alike. In fact, the 2019 [Canada's food guide](#) promotes mindful eating as a core healthy eating habit for all Canadians. The results from a recent study that took place in BC classrooms (grades 4-6) found that students who took part in a mindfulness-based program, which included a mindful eating component, had better social adjustment, academic performance, and stress management⁴. Among adolescents, a recent study found that a mindfulness-based intervention showed promise in reducing risk of eating disorders⁵.

Here are some strategies that will help create a positive eating experience in the classroom:

1. The more often you expose students to a food, the more inclined they are to like it. Offer easily accessible foods rather than speciality foods (i.e., apples, rather than dragon fruit).
2. **Don't pressure** or reward children for trying new foods. Research shows that children who are pressured or rewarded when trying a new food are less likely to go back to it than children who are simply exposed to the food and allowed to decide on their own whether or not to eat it.
3. **When eating with students**, teachers decide what recipes to prepare, where and when eating will happen. Students decide whether they want to try the food and how much they eat. At lunch and snack, parents decide (with their children) what foods are available.

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Links and Resources

Elementary:

Megrette Fletcher, Discover Mindful Eating for Kids: 75 Activities for Managing Picky Eaters, Overeaters, Speed Eaters and Every Kid In-Between (Skelly Skills, 2015).

Laurie Grossman, Master of Mindfulness: How to Be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress (Instant Help, 2016).

Sara Marlowe, No Ordinary Apple: A Story about Eating Mindfully (Wisdom Publications, 2013)

All Ages:

Calm App

A meditation app that offers a free subscription for K-12 teachers worldwide
calm.com/schools

Headspace ® App

A meditation app offering sessions for a variety of themes, including sessions created specifically for mindful eating, and for children
headspace.com

The Center for Mindful Eating

A non-profit organization providing information and resources on mindful eating
thecenterformindfuleating.org

Mindfulness in Schools

A non-profit organization providing mindfulness curricula and materials for schools
mindfulnessinschools.org

Mindfulness for Teens

A BC-based website providing mindfulness information, tools, and resources for teens
mindfulnessforteens.com

MindUP Program

A classroom-based mindfulness program for students ages 3 to 14
mindup.org/mindup/mindup-for-teachers

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More information for Teachers

Curriculum Links

Grade 4 – Grade 10: This lesson supports the Big Ideas and Learning Standards in the Physical and Health Education BC Curriculum and can also link to other subject areas.

- Mindful eating connects physical, emotional, and mental well-being, as well as increasing awareness of the social and environmental factors influencing health.

Want to do more nutrition education with your class?

Explore our other [lesson plans](#) or book a [free 1-hour workshop](#).

Related Lesson Plans

Apple Tasting (Gr.2-12):

bcdairy.ca/uploads/bcdairy/Lessons/Apple_Tasting.pdf

Meals Then and Now (Gr.4-7):

bcdairy.ca/uploads/bcdairy/Lessons/meals_then_and_now.pdf

So What's Normal: Health at Every Size (Gr. 6-9)

bcdairy.ca/uploads/bcdairy/Lessons/So-whats-normal.pdf

Do you think you are healthy? Exploring factors affecting food choices (Gr. 6-9)

bcdairy.ca/uploads/bcdairy/Lessons/Do-you-think-youre-healthy.pdf

References

1. Warren, J., Smith, N. and Ashwell, M. (2017). A structured literature review on the role of mindfulness, mindful eating and intuitive eating in changing eating behaviours: effectiveness and associated potential mechanisms. *Nutrition Research Reviews*, 30(02), pp.272-283.
2. Provincial Government of British Columbia. (2010). School Meal and School Nutrition Program Handbook. Page 1.
3. Khan, Z. and Zadeh, Z. (2014). Mindful Eating and its Relationship with Mental Well-being. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 159, pp.69-73.
4. Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Oberle, E., Lawlor, M. S., Abbott, D., Thomson, K., Oberlander, T. F., & Diamond, A. (2015). Enhancing cognitive and social-emotional development through a simple-to-administer mindfulness-based school program for elementary school children: a randomized controlled trial. *Developmental psychology*, 51(1), 52-66.
5. Atkinson, M.J. and Wade, T.D. (2015). Mindfulness-Based Prevention for Eating Disorders: A School-Based Cluster Randomized Controlled Study. *Int J Eat Disord.* (48), 1024–1037

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Student Worksheet

Barriers to Mindful Eating

Instructions: In small groups, discuss the following questions. Remember to use the five senses and the 5 W's (who, what, when, where, why) in your answers. Share your group's answers during the class discussion.

1. Here at school, can you describe the eating environment at lunchtime?
Answer questions, such as: Where do you eat? Is it busy or calm? Do you take time to enjoy your food?
2. What are at least three reasons we don't eat mindfully at lunch or when having a snack?
3. What are at least three ways we can make eating lunch an important event and remind ourselves to eat mindfully at school?