

Healthier lunch boxes

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Introduction

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This healthier lunch box guidance highlights easy ways for your school to promote healthier food and drink choices in lunch boxes.

It looks at how you can work with parents and carers, and the wider school community, to ensure that consistent food and nutrition messages are communicated.

All meals provided to school children must comply with the nutritional standards for school lunches.¹ You can support these standards by looking at how they can be translated across to healthier lunch boxes in your school.

Benefits of promoting healthier lunch boxes

Promoting healthier lunch boxes can:

- encourage pupils' interest in making healthier choices about their diet;
- support the Department of Education's nutritional standards for school lunches;
- encourage a whole school approach to healthy eating;
- increase the contact between school and home;
- support your school's community links;
- give parents relevant information on aspects of food and health.

Why focus on healthier lunchboxes?

A lunch box provides a valuable contribution towards a child's nutritional requirements for a day. According to the Department of Education's 2008 school census, over 127,000 children in Northern Ireland (42% of pupils present) took a packed lunch to school.²

An all-island study (2005) looking at the nutritional balance of over 2,500 school children's packed lunches found that 9 out of every 10 lunch boxes (92%) contained foods high in fat and sugar.³ Almost half of all packed lunches (47%) had no portions of fruit and vegetable and over two thirds of lunch boxes (71%) did not meet the compulsory school meals standards for Northern Ireland.

Similar research conducted by the Food Standards Agency in 2004 also indicated that children who take a packed lunch to school are eating far too much fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar in one meal.⁴ The survey also revealed that under a fifth of lunch boxes (16%) did not contain any starchy food such as sandwiches, pasta or rice, and that just under half the lunch boxes surveyed (48%) did not contain a portion of fruit or chopped vegetables. Three out of four lunch boxes (74%) also failed to meet the nutritional standards set in 2001 for England's schools meals.

Clearly, there is a need to make lunch boxes healthier and more appetising to pupils. But this does not mean that they should miss out on all the things that they enjoy eating. Variety is the key to a healthier lunch box. It is all about getting a balance and a good variety of foods over a period of time, for example a week. No single food can provide all the essential nutrients that the body needs.

What should be in a healthier lunch box?

A healthier lunch box should be based on the eatwell plate food groups (see www.eatwell.gov.uk), which promote balance and variety in the diet. Parents and pupils should try to include something from each of the eatwell food groups in the lunch box and ensure that this includes a drink.

Bright and colourful foods with different tastes and textures should be encouraged. Fruit and vegetables do this naturally. If the food looks good then the chances are that children will want to try it.

There are many ways to keep the lunch box exciting, for example adopt a colour theme for each day, take inspiration from holidays or different countries and foods that are in season or grown in the school or home garden.

Foods that a healthy lunch box should include

- A good portion of starchy food, for example wholemeal roll or bread, wraps, pitta pocket, pasta or rice salad.
- Plenty of fruit and vegetables, for example an apple, satsuma, handful of cherry tomatoes or carrot sticks, mini-can of fruit chunks in natural juice or a small box of raisins.
- A drink of semi-skimmed milk or a portion of dairy food, for example individual cheese portion or pot of yogurt.
- A portion of lean meat, fish, eggs or beans, for example ham, chicken, beef, tuna, egg or hummus.
- A drink, for example unsweetened fruit juice, semi-skimmed milk or water.

Foods that should be limited

Remember, foods high in fat and sugar should be restricted. Nutritional standards for schools lunches do not allow sweets, chocolate or savoury snacks such as crisps, fizzy drinks and other high sugar drinks to be served at lunch times.¹ Any lunch box guidance or policy should reflect this. Treats can be included at lunch time; however, plain or lower sugar varieties should be encouraged.

For more information on what to have in a lunch box refer to the 'School food: top marks' lunch box leaflet, *Are you packing a healthy lunch?* (available at www.publichealth.hscni.net).

Case study

One school nutrition action group (SNAG) at a primary school has built on its previous work of involving the whole school community in health issues by setting up a healthier lunch box challenge day. The day included a massive picnic on the school field with pupils, staff, parents and invited guests, including the local MP. It was a lively and enjoyable social occasion.

"We would definitely repeat this event, even though it was a lot of work and organisation. Children, staff and parents have responded positively and everyone has done their bit to make the day a success. Certainly the children are more knowledgeable now about healthier eating and making food choices and I think the staff and parents are too." Head teacher



Step by step plan

1. Getting started

As healthier lunch boxes are an important aspect of food and drink provision in your school, a good start is to think about them as part of your whole school approach. Lunch box issues should be considered by the school council or SNAG, particularly involving pupils and parents.

A whole school approach allows you to:

- outline to parents, staff and pupils the school's expectations of what constitutes a healthier lunch box;
- help parents and pupils put together a lunch box which is healthier and realistic;
- set up a standard, consistent approach to the issue of food in your school;
- promote the fact that your school takes the health of its pupils seriously.

To do

To find out what is required you could conduct an audit of lunch box contents before you start your healthier lunch box promotion. The audit will give you a baseline from which you can see if any changes occur as a result of promoting healthier lunch boxes.

- ✓ Ask pupils who have a lunch box to write down the contents of their lunch box for a day.
- ✓ Analyse the responses. The results will highlight the least and most consumed food groups and might indicate that you need to place an emphasis on encouraging pupils to eat more fruit and vegetables or have a drink at lunch time.
- ✓ Use the information to plan and undertake your healthier lunch box activities.

2. Raise awareness

When planning healthier lunch box activities, you need to ensure that you communicate a consistent message to everyone involved in your school. By using the 'School food: top marks' lunch box leaflet and other resources you will ensure that consistent healthy eating messages about lunch boxes can be delivered throughout your school.

Pupils like to be involved in making choices, so why not encourage them to help? At school this might involve making lunch box items or trying new foods as part of a healthy eating topic. At home, pupils could be encouraged to help with the food shopping or help make the contents of their lunch box wherever possible.

You could try ...

- A healthier lunch box assembly.
- A healthier lunch box buffet for parents, children and local organisations.
- Running a theme day at school to motivate parents and pupils. You could try a 'Fruit Friday', a 'Red food day', a non-sandwich day or a 'Funky food Friday'.
- Implementing a whole school health day or week. You could focus on all aspects of health, including physical activity.
- Including top tips for parents about healthier lunch boxes in your school newsletter, website, prospectus or brochure.
- Seeking parents' and pupils' opinions about healthier lunch boxes. What support would they like? This could be identified through a simple questionnaire or at a parents' evening.
- Explaining to parents and pupils what you want to achieve and why. For example, you want to ensure that all the children in your school are fit and healthy.
- Stressing the importance of a balanced and varied diet. Do not ban certain food items (unless on grounds of safety, for example peanuts and risk to allergy sufferers). Be positive and promote best practice. One approach might be to promote a healthier lunch box checklist for parents.
- Focusing on food safety. Give ideas and tips on how to keep lunch boxes and drinks bottles clean and safe.

Step by step plan

3. Communicate with parents

Parents play an important and influential role in determining their child's food and drink choices and preferences. Information to parents needs to be consistent, helpful and realistic. Approaches will differ between primary and post-primary schools, but ultimately the goal is the same – to promote a healthy lifestyle.

It is important to communicate to parents all of the elements that could contribute to healthier lunch boxes. Also consider working with health professionals such as community dietitians, school nurses, and community dental teams.

Examples of good communication ideas

- Providing healthier lunch box information to all parents by sending out the 'School food: top marks' healthy lunch box leaflet, *Are you packing a healthy lunch?*
- Setting up a display in the main school entrance or at a parents' evening.
- Holding a special healthy eating lunch box day or week, inviting parents to an assembly to watch children talking about healthy eating and looking at the work they have completed during the term.
- Asking the PTA to promote health as the theme for the summer fete or through social occasions and events at school.
- Asking parents what support they would like, sending out a questionnaire to gauge their opinion. What could you realistically offer?
- Setting up a series of lunch box workshops for parents and pupils to pass on top tips for lunch box provision.
- Including healthier lunch box suggestions in your newsletter or school website.

Case study

One primary school created a newsletter featuring lunch box top tips for parents. The response was positive and resulted in the whole school community developing healthier food choices.

'Healthier lunch boxes has been the best. I learnt a lot about which are good foods to eat.'

Year 5 pupil

4. Run a healthier lunch box workshop

Running a workshop provides parents or carers with some ideas, suggestions and support. Providing support with the opportunity to chat to other parents will help to engage parents in addressing the health of their child.

Top tips

- Be realistic. Find out when parents usually have contact with the school. Can you build a workshop around an event that parents attend already?
- Give notice. Let parents know about what you intend to do. Some may wish to come along, but need notice to make arrangements for family and work commitments. Publicise and promote the event.
- Support the family. Depending on your school circumstance, you could run a workshop where parents and their children work together.
- Keep to the point. Keep the workshop short and snappy. Make your point, allow discussion and provide support, for example hand out the 'School food: top marks' healthy lunch box leaflet, *Are you packing a healthy lunch?*
- Make it interactive. Make your workshop more fun (and therefore more memorable) by including some hands-on activities, for example making a simple sandwich or snack.
- Be positive. Promote good choices, balance, variety and health, rather than concentrating on the negative.
- Do not give up. Only a few parents may attend your first workshop – but the news will soon spread. Be persistent and provide a number of opportunities for parents to attend.
- Make links. Your health promotion coordinator, community dietitian, school nurse or supermarket representative may be able to help. Make contact and find out.
- Give your workshop a theme. For example, 'Summer lunch box top tips', 'Taking the chore out of the lunch box' or 'Making a healthy lunch for less than £1'.
- Promote a healthy picnic as part of the school's sports day. Invite parents to join in, preparing food and taking part in the activities.
- Hold a drop-in workshop at a school open evening (for prospective new pupils' parents, for example) or parents' evening. Run a series of 10–15 minute workshops about healthy lunch boxes.

Step by step plan

5. Store healthier lunch boxes at school

Provision for storage can affect what parents provide their child for lunch. How lunch boxes are stored, and whether they are kept cool, can be an important factor in the type of foods included. For example, sandwich fillings such as egg and cheese are sometimes not included as there is concern from parents that the ingredients will become 'smelly' and therefore off-putting to their child at lunch time.

The Food Standards Agency advises that if food is carefully prepared on the day of consumption, there are relatively few foods where lack of refrigeration until lunch time could lead to the growth of harmful organisms, although it is important that they are not kept in a warm place.

Schools need to be realistic when dealing with the issue of storing lunch boxes, while also acknowledging real concerns about food safety and hygiene. The school building, location, pupil roll and size are just a few factors that will determine the way lunch boxes are stored.

Things to consider

- How can we store lunch boxes away from sources of heat, for example pipes, radiators and direct sunlight? Where are the cool, well ventilated places, for example a cool dark cupboard?
- How can we encourage parents to use insulated boxes or 'ice' packs?
- What is the best way to promote top lunch box safety tips?
- Could we supply fridges for classrooms, perhaps funded by the PTA?

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Step by step plan

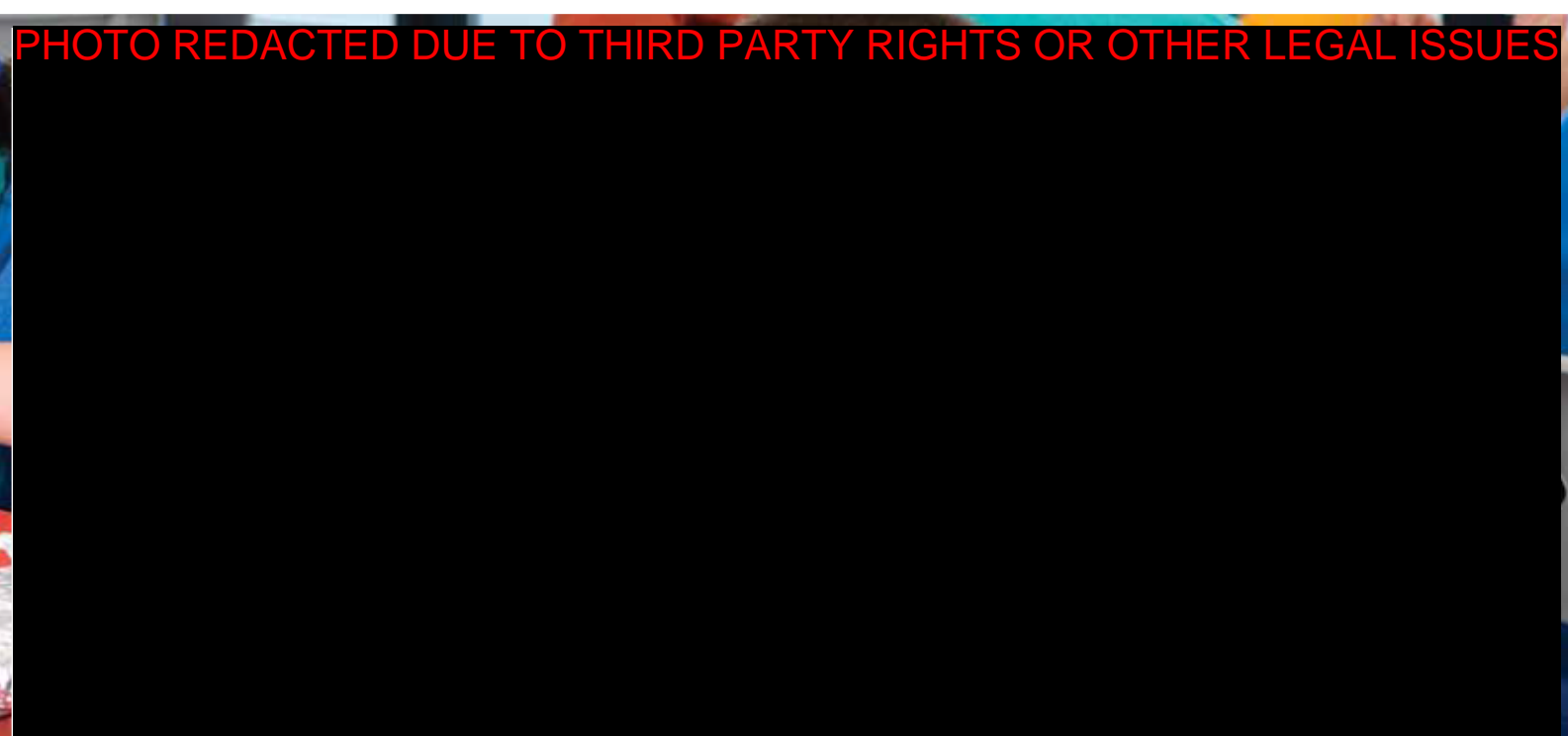
6. Encourage social eating

An important aspect of developing good eating habits is to look at where and how children eat.

Depending on your school's size, resources and number of pupils who have a lunch box, various organisational methods for eating at lunch time can be employed.

To do

- ✓ Create a sociable eating area in the summer term (some schools put up gazebos and provide benches to improve children's social and eating skills).
- ✓ Encourage better eating and social skills by sitting older and younger pupils together. Older pupils can act as good role models for younger children. By 'serving' water or milk they can encourage younger children to consume plenty of fluid.
- ✓ Establish benches in the playground to encourage pupils to eat together.
- ✓ If space is not a problem, seat children who have a lunch box with those having a school meal. This will allow friends to sit together and possibly encourage children to try a school dinner.



7. Evaluate success

Establishing activities in your school to promote healthier lunch boxes might be fun and generate interest from pupils, parents and the local community. But does it work? Has your hard work paid off? Have lunch boxes improved? How would you know?

To do

- ✓ Conduct an audit of lunch box contents before you start your planned activities. This process will give you a baseline from which you can see if any changes occur as a result of your activities.
- ✓ Review the activities you tried out. Were they a success? Can you run them again?
- ✓ Collect evidence of what happened, for example photographs of a workshop or cooking session.
- ✓ Set up a display of pupils' ideas for interesting lunch boxes.
- ✓ Talk to pupils, parents and the local community. Has the promotion drive had an impact? What worked well? Would they like further support?
- ✓ Ask if the school lunch supervisors have noticed any difference. What have they seen?
- ✓ Think about introducing healthier lunch box guidelines for all pupils.

Case study

One healthy lunch box initiative was piloted and evaluated in primary schools in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. Schools that implemented healthy lunch box guidelines and incorporated this into school policy received an award. Support from boards of governors, staff, pupils and parents was essential to the success of the scheme.

Healthier lunch box checklist

- ✓ Have you identified the benefits of healthier lunch boxes for your school?
- ✓ Are you clear about what you want to achieve?
- ✓ Have you involved the school council or SNAG?
- ✓ Have you asked the parents and pupils what they would like? Are they fully involved?
- ✓ Do you know what pupils have in their lunch boxes?
- ✓ Have you identified any pupils with allergies?
- ✓ Is the advice given on what to provide in a lunch box consistent with the nutritional standards for school lunches?
- ✓ Have you got a plan to promote healthier lunch boxes to pupils and parents?
- ✓ Have you considered health and safety issues, including storage of lunch boxes in your school?
- ✓ Have pupils and parents been given the opportunity to feedback their opinions about the healthier lunch box drive?
- ✓ Have you planned how you will monitor and evaluate the impact of your healthier lunch box drive?

Integrating with other school food projects

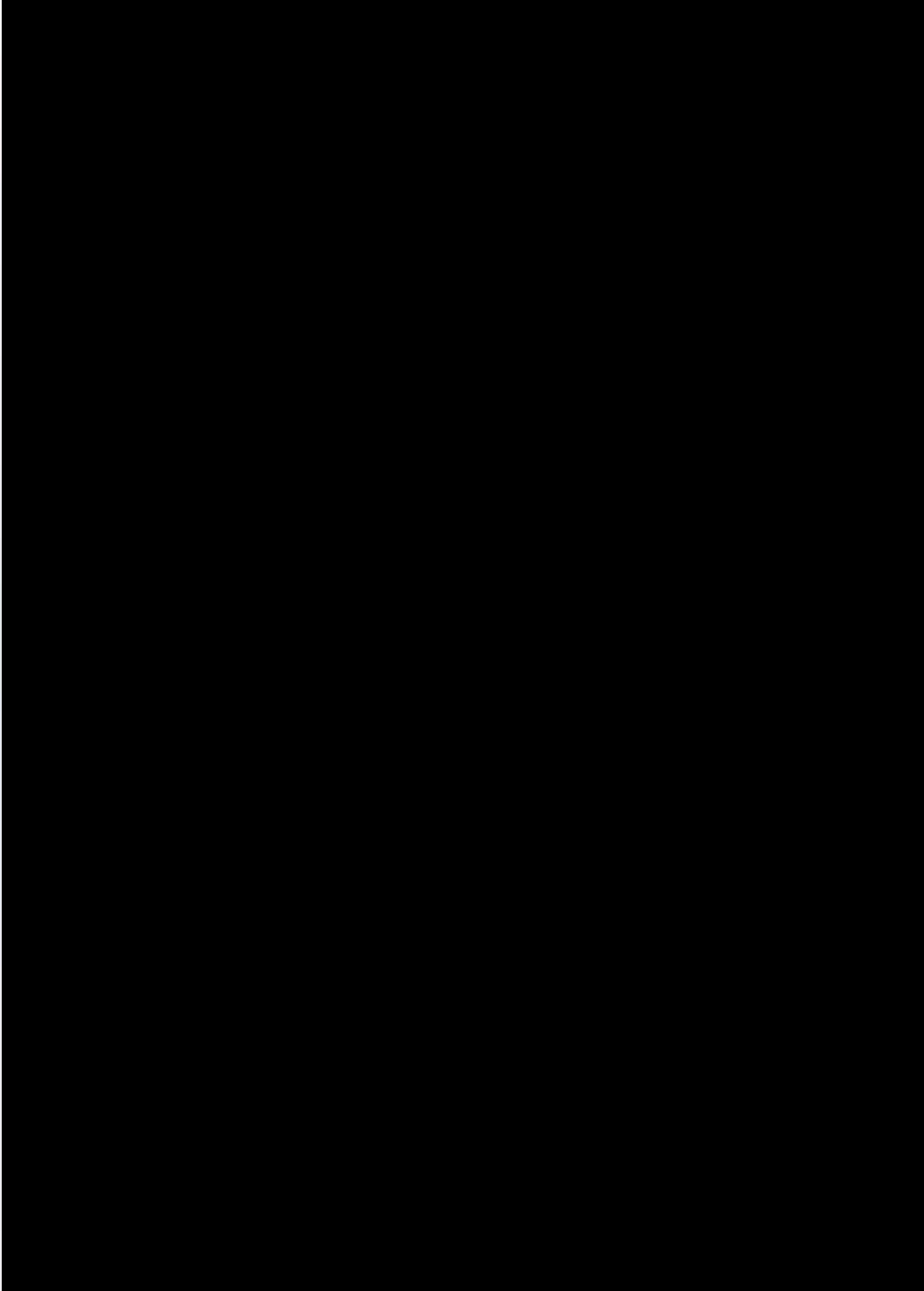
There are many natural links that can be made from healthier lunch boxes to other food in school projects, depending on your school.

Links could include:

- encouraging the use of vending machines, which can help extend the variety of lunch box contents, and making a range of healthier food and drink available. Items could include pieces of fruit, yogurts and sandwiches;
- promoting healthier tuck shops that provide healthier food and drinks suitable for in lunch boxes, for example fruit or filled wraps;
- actively promoting and encouraging water consumption, including putting water as the drink in lunch boxes;
- developing healthier food preferences and sociable eating habits through the environment in which pupils eat. Promote healthier eating and drinking and encourage variety by using posters to create stimulating displays.

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Curriculum links

Primary

Language and literacy

Using a story book as a stimulus, for example *The dinosaur's packed lunch*, pupils can write a story about the 'amazing lunch box adventure', write instructions on how to make a sandwich or an exotic fruit salad, or design a leaflet or poster promoting a healthier lunch box.

The arts

Pupils can design and make collages or posters of foods suitable for a healthier lunch box such as fruit salads or fruit and vegetable snacks, sandwiches or salads (pasta, rice) or bread snacks.

Set pupils the challenge of creating a school lunch box ideas and recipe book. They can collect ideas and suggestions from members of staff and parents. This information can be developed into a booklet for use in the school newsletter or website.

The world around us

History – what type of foods did children eat at school during World War 2 when rationing existed? What foods could have been included in a lunch box?

Geography – where does food come from? Using the contents of a sample lunch box (or their own) children investigate where in the world their food may have originated. Has it been made in the UK? Was it grown in another country? Plot the food on the map of the world.

Post-primary

The arts

Design and technology – pupils can develop a new lunch box suitable for primary aged pupils.

Learning for life and work

Home economics – pupils can keep a food diary, logging the types of food they eat for lunch. These data can then be analysed using nutritional analysis software to calculate the energy and nutrients provided by their lunch box or school lunch.

Personal development – either write a newspaper article on healthier lunch boxes or develop an information leaflet for teenagers about how to put together a healthier lunch box.

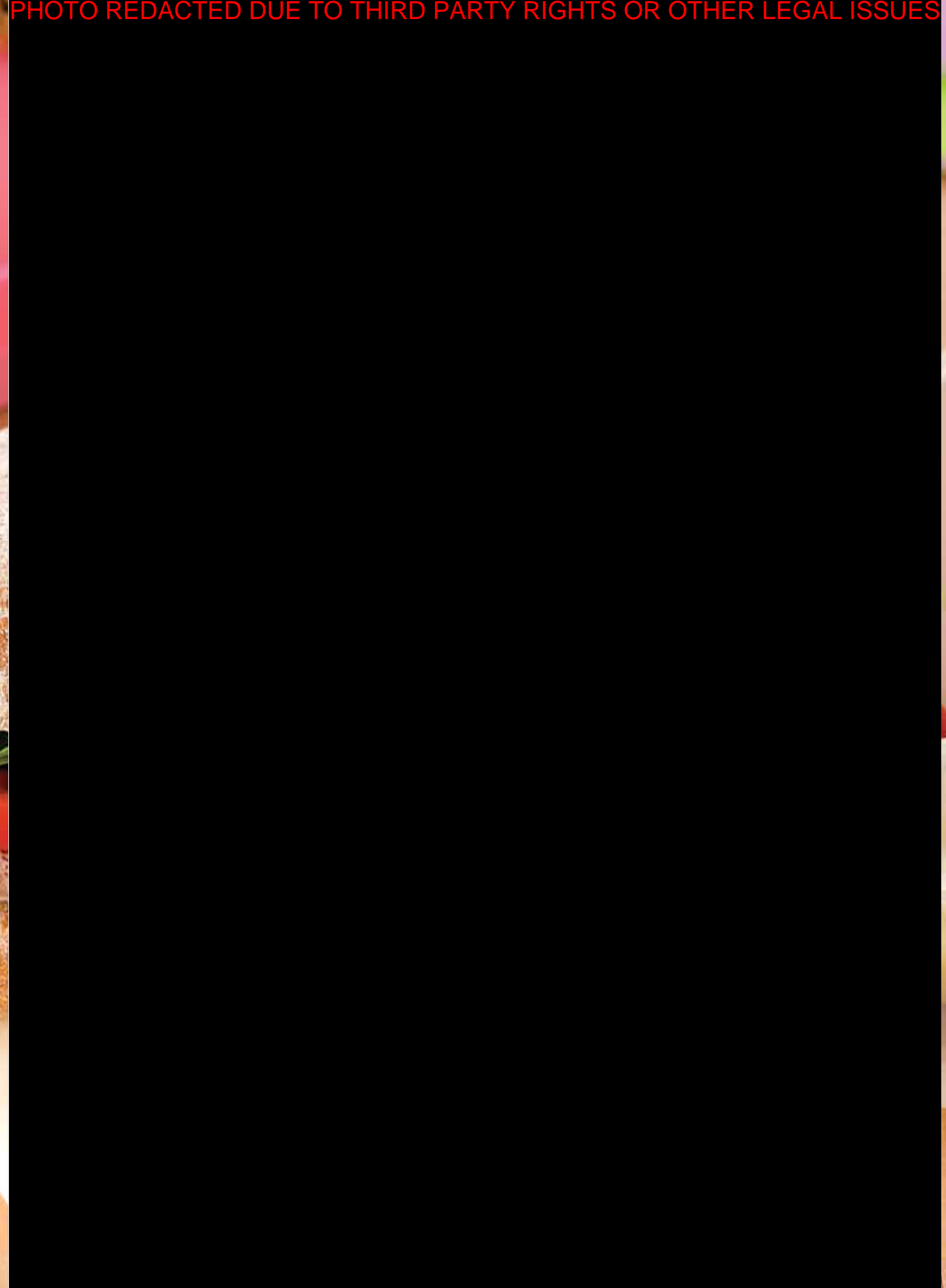
For further advice and suggestions, go to:

www.ccea.org.uk

www.nicurriculum.org.uk

References

1. Department of Education. Nutritional standards for school lunches: a guide for implementation. Belfast: DE, 2008.
2. Department of Education. October 2008 school meal census. Unpublished.
3. Safefood. An investigation into the nutritional balance of school children's packed lunches: An all-Ireland study. Unpublished.
4. Food Standards Agency. School lunchbox survey. London: FSA, 2004.



Sources of further information

The following list provides links to further resources and information that may support you in developing your healthier lunch boxes.

British Nutrition Foundation

www.nutrition.org.uk

Provides background information on food and nutrition, including lunch boxes.

Food Standards Agency

www.eatwell.gov.uk

Is the website for consumer advice on healthy eating. It provides background information and advice on making and promoting healthier lunch boxes in schools, including a menu planner.

Safefood

www.safefood.eu

An all-island body responsible for the promotion of food safety. This website provides practical advice and handy tips on lunch boxes.

Department of Education

www.deni.gov.uk

This site provides information on the nutritional standards for school lunches which came into effect on 1 September 2007.

School Food Trust

www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk

Provides information for schools on packed lunches. Includes case studies and a template for a lunch box policy, supporting letters for parents and information on a healthier lunch box.

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