

Talking about Healthy Habits

Providing nutritious meals and snacks is an important function of your program. It is also important for staff members to model a healthy approach to fitness. However, sometimes it is not so easy. Read these scenarios and decide how you would respond.

1. "He just never eats anything. Honestly, I don't know how he stays alive," Jody exclaims as you watch Paul dump a full plate of food into the garbage. "He is so skinny, and his mom has asked me to write her a note everyday about how much he eats. I just can't get him to take a single bite of anything other than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He's got to eat something. What should I do?"

Talk to Jody about ways to encourage food experimentation to broaden Paul's palette. Offer interesting combinations of foods, and build this into lesson plans. For example, they could taste red, yellow, and green peppers and vote on which ones they like. They could try the peppers with and without a sauce. Continue making sure Paul is offered every food every day, and that he is encouraged to take portions of every food. Continue sharing information with Paul's mother.

2. As you walk into the front office, you overhear raised voices drifting from the manager's office. You notice Lillian, an active duty Marine and the parent of a school-age child. She is holding a pamphlet from your program's new nutrition initiative. "I think it's great you're doing this, but I think it's pretty hypocritical, Dawn. I mean, I don't want to be insensitive, but the leader of the pre-teen program is definitely overweight. I'm concerned that she can't move fast enough to keep our kids safe in an emergency. I also don't think she's the kind of role model our kids need to be seeing. You know, many of your military parents have to meet regular weigh-ins to keep mission ready ... what is your staff doing?" Dawn, the manager, sees you and pulls you into the room. What do you do and say?

Thank the mother for her concern and for bringing her concerns to your attention. Let her know that your program is committed to modeling healthy habits, but you are also committed to modeling inclusive attitudes and healthy body images. Let her know that the fitness initiative is program-wide: children, youth, families, and staff are all welcome to get involved.

3. You know that Annette, a staff member in your school-age program, is recovering from anorexia and bulimia. She has never said anything about her exercise habits, but you know that she works out every morning, every evening, and for several hours at midday. You overheard some of the girls talking about her muscles and how much they want to look like her. You overheard them discussing the calories in the snack they were eating and how they needed to lose weight. You are concerned that the girls might adopt unhealthy habits. What would you do?

Talk to your supervisor about next steps. This is a complicated issue and one that benefits from multiple perspectives. Your first priority is to make sure the children in your program are making healthy choices. Make sure that your program offers healthy, balanced snacks. Consider planning activities or lessons about body image, health, fitness, and nutrition with your staff. If you suspect a problem, talk to the girl and her family. Your next priority is making sure your workplace is supportive for staff members. Make sure Annette knows you are always there to talk. Eventually, it might be powerful for her to share her experience.

4. Sandra, a staff member in your preschool program, constantly jokes about being “allergic to exercise.” When kids ask her to play outdoor games, she always has a witty comment and a reason to sit on the bench with other children. How would you address this issue with Sandra?

Talk to Sandra directly about her responsibilities. If she is not moving around the playground, she cannot supervise children adequately. She is also setting a negative example for the children; child development staff should model enthusiasm and willingness to try new things. They should also model curiosity and active learning. Set goals with Sandra for increasing her physical activity and involvement on the playground. Brainstorm activities she enjoys that the children might enjoy, as well. If Sandra does not respond, talk to your supervisor about your concerns.