

Ethical and Healthy Food Choices and Its Connection to the Individual

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Overview

This unit is designed to be part of an independent after school program/course for a small group of students. Length of unit is based on meeting once a week during the course of a nine week period. Students will voluntarily choose to become part of this group with the intention to examine human eating habits. According to nutritionist Judith Rodriguez, “the term eating habits (or food habits) refers to why and how people eat, which foods they eat, and with whom they eat, as well as the ways people obtain, store, use, and discard food. Individual, social, cultural, religious, economic, environmental, and political factors all influence people’s eat habits” (Rodriguez).

The unit is intended to give an opportunity for high school students to research topics, share findings, and create food diaries with alternative choices relating to special occasion eating. One of our goals will be to look at developing a healthier, morally guided path when making food choices. We will concentrate on examining external and internal influences regarding food choices that people make and the contributing factors to the rise in obesity in America.

Rationale

It's a date. We eat. It's a holiday. Let's eat! Things upset us. We eat. What food do we choose? Why do we choose it? Why is eating the central focus for all gatherings ... whether business or celebration? We are wired to make choices in eating that affect our entire life. How is the wiring influenced? Our choices affect our perceptions and the perceptions of others. Can we examine our reasoning and change our habits? After all, no matter what, we must eat.

There are so many people whose food choices have led them to be called obese. In the article, "Seductions of Food" Lis Harris states, "sixty-five percent of Americans are overweight, and nearly half of these people are considered obese" (52). More and more students are also becoming obese. Ms. Harris goes on to say, "twenty-five percent of all Americans under nineteen are either overweight or obese" (53). Since the statistics are so alarming, it is worth dedicating time and effort into researching what is happening. If nothing else, students who partake in this group will be able to look at what influences the food choices they make. At the same time, they will be able to look at ways they themselves can adjust their own consumption and make a difference in their own dietary menu.

This unit will be set up so that topics can be researched and discussed within the small group setting. The teacher will provide an article for each subject and then after discussion of the main points of the article, students will have the opportunity to investigate (in the computer lab/library) other articles relating to each focus.

Cultural

One of Dictionary.com's definitions for culture is "the quality in a person or society that arises from a concern for what is regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits, etc." Using this definition, we can say that people who want to be part of the collective group (society) will strive to achieve what is deemed as okay in order to be accepted. In the United States, we have become accustomed to eating out on a regular basis and it is perfectly acceptable. We especially gorge ourselves on fast food entrees such as a hamburger, French fries and a Coke or milkshake. It is so easy to eat thousands of calories in one day when one meal can be a whopping 1280 calories and 52.5 grams of fat. An average amount of calories that should be consumed in a day for a man weighing

185 and 6'2" tall should be around 2500. Let's say someone ate out for lunch and had already consumed a breakfast at home that had approximately 350 calories then he or she has already consumed the bulk of his or her caloric intake for the day. According to societal expectations, it is perfectly okay to keep eating this way, because we have become a fast food culture and self gratification is acceptable. "Hedonistic consumption is still more of a priority than nutritional goodness" (Owens). By the way, the fat grams consumed at lunch were very high considering that 75 grams of fat per day is what would be recommended for someone who is trying to maintain his or her weight. There are charts and formulas that are helpful in figuring this out. So, culturally it is totally acceptable to over eat calories and fat grams.

Looking at this topic, of what is acceptable to consume, will make for fruitful discussion when one considers that what is okay to do according to society (eat fast food) ... is not producing an acceptable outcome which is the rise in obesity. An informative DVD to watch to illustrate the impact of fast food on the rise in obesity is "Super Size Me" by Morgan Spurlock. Within this film we learn many things such as how eating fast food on a regular basis is harmful to our bodies. Also, we learn that as a society we find overeating to be so culturally acceptable that car companies have redesigned cup holders to accommodate the 800 calorie Big Gulp which is a half gallon drink that contains forty-eight teaspoons of sugar.

Religious and moral

For this part of the unit, each student can examine the restrictions that his or her religion imposes on food options. It can be an opportunity for each student to hear about other religions and the different foods that are prohibited. The research part will be to examine "why" foods are prohibited and the basis for including and celebrating with foods that are incorporated in ceremonial gatherings.

Tracing where our food comes from can be enlightening. We are not eating as our grandparents did. For today's "modern industrial eater ... we know far less about where our food comes from and how it was raised, processed and delivered" (U.S. Catholic). What we eat has an effect on our bodies and the environment. Unhealthful eating has impacted both adults and children. Obesity is at an all time high and dietary related diseases are on the rise. We must ask ourselves can we afford to cause irreparable damage to our bodies when we truly have only one per lifetime. Is this not why there are sermons against gluttony?

As our eating habits distress our own bodies, there is also a ripple effect on the world as well, from poorly treated workers, to the misuse of valuable

resources, to the mistreatment of animals. Also, we should look at controlling our appetite in the midst of abundance because it is the right thing to do. All of these ethical issues comprise the moral dilemma that today's food consumer faces.

Environmental and Social

Environmental connections we have to food have a vast impact on choices we make. Our food and activities are greatly influenced by environment. When investigating this topic, we need to consider such things as physical lay out of a city, the types of neighborhoods, commercial land use, transportation, built structures such as sidewalks, bike trails and so forth.

During the twentieth century, caloric consumption has been steadily on the rise and our physical activity has become almost non-existent. This shift has occurred since the growth of the fast food industry and the influx in the amount of grocery stores at the expense of physical fitness. In a study done for *Physiology and Behavior*, authors acknowledged that "away from home eating, including restaurant and fast food consumption, is shown to be associated with a decrease in macro/micro nutrient intake and diet quality, weight gain, and increased BMI, energy density and total energy intake" (604). Food availability in different areas affects BMI. For example, the authors found that "predominantly white neighborhoods have significantly greater access to low-cost, quality food sources than black neighborhoods matched within the same socioeconomic status" (604).

American communities could help the cause by providing recreation centers and sidewalks to their constituents. "Research has examined environmental determinants such as community sports, access to home fitness equipment, outdoor play space, time spent outdoors, family environments, and exercise opportunity" (605). Many would seek to use accessible facilities if they are free and within a reasonable proximity to their homes. "Residential land use built environments have been shown to be a very important predictor of walking" (605). Sharing this with students can lead to a discussion regarding what is available in their communities.

Another aspect of the environmental perspective is researching how far food has traveled to get to a location. How long can we go as a nation without considering the constant depletion of resources? Author Barbara Kingsolver vowed to eat only seasoned and locally grown food for a year. She wanted to try this with her family to explore the notion that eating locally is better for the body and environment. According to Kingsolver, "the average food item on any U.S. grocery store shelf has traveled farther than most families go on their annual vacations" (Kingsolver). The Kingsolver experiment can be debated in a class

discussion regarding the positives and the negatives on the environment and economical effect of consuming only locally grown foods.

Politics and Economics

Monetary profits should no longer be the main consideration for a world that faces as many environmental changes as we do today. Author Professor Tim Lang describes some of the challenges and food problems we are facing:

Food problems have rarely been out of the headlines in the past two decades. They began with environmental issues: pesticides, waste pollution, and soil degradation. Now we face even bigger problems: climate change, water shortage and oil dependency. Meanwhile, public health crept on to the agenda; first food poisoning and a string of safety problems ranging from chemical residues to antibiotic resistance; now obesity. For years, the role of diet in premature death has been known: heart disease, stroke, some cancers, and diabetes. These diseases are the big killers in modern affluent societies but are now also epidemic in developing countries. (Lang)

In the past, policies have been helpful to companies and their profits more so than the costs for such profit. Consideration of whether the environment and its people can sustain such policies, for long term, has not been taken into account. Both government and big business need to create better policies and find ways to sustain agriculture and other food sources without compromising them.

Policymakers have a direct impact on food availability, labeling, transportation and pricing. According to author Barry Popkin, “one recent state-level ecological analysis states that food price and the shopping environment play a critical role in explaining the obesity epidemic ... pricing is one of the most influential factors in determining food choice, second only to taste” (605). Historically we have seen that politics have played a big role in food and drink consumption. A few examples that could be looked at, for the purpose of discussion, are the Dry Law, Palm Oil, and the Food pyramid.

The Dry Law is the law that enforced the prohibition of alcohol; no one could manufacture, transport, import, export or sale alcoholic beverages. This law, as we well know, in turn, was the catalyst to Speakeasies popping up everywhere and the illegal production and sale of alcohol. So, can we conclude that perhaps the law was too restrictive and that maybe a more moderate stance

should have been taken? Can we learn from this? Can government policymakers come up with a plan that is not a “cold turkey” approach to fast food regulations?

Palm oil is an example of a product for which there are dire consequences. While palm oil is the leading source of income for many of the world’s poorer countries, the product continues to be more and more sought after. Plantations are taking the place of the Rain Forest and many species are becoming extinct. Author Rhett Butler states that “beyond the loss of forest ecosystems, the production of palm oil, as currently practiced, can be quite damaging to the environment” (Butler). Class discussion can center on the question: When a product has a negative impact on the environment, is it worth it?

Another example of governmental influence on food consumption is how the government has promoted what healthy foods should be eaten and in what amount. Fortunately, the Food Guide Pyramid came “under some harsh criticism in recent years by many scientists, nutritionists and medical researchers. They said it was outdated, gave misinformation, and at worst, can lead to obesity and health problems” (Greene). Recently, the Pyramid has been revamped, but as scientists and nutritionists have pointed out its flaws in the past, is it accurate, is there misinformation, can people trust it? As a group of researchers, students can head to the computer lab to investigate the web site MyPyramid.gov. When arriving at the site, students can answer questions and create a pyramid for themselves.

Individual

Everyone is unique. Likes and dislikes concerning food are developed over time and “are influenced by personal experiences such as encouragement to eat, exposure to a food, family customs and rituals, advertising, and personal values” (Rodriguez). During our childhoods we basically eat everything we are given and we are forced to try what is placed before us. This does not always mean we will like what we are served, but we may grow to appreciate some of our family customs and the cuisine to which we are exposed.

Most importantly, we need to learn to be mindful of what we put into our bodies for several reasons, such as, keeping the body in great working condition and healthy, keeping our resources at an optimal level, avoiding greediness for nourishment that can be used by others, and saving other species on earth by monitoring production and use of food products.

Responsibility for body maintenance is much like that of a car. One must put in what is good in order to keep a car running efficiently. According to Tufts University, “a study of some 15,000 adults nationwide shows that more than 25 percent of our calories come from the following items: cakes, cookies, pies, pastries, ice cream, puddings, cheese cake, sugary candy, syrup, soda pop, sweetened non carbonated beverages, corn chips, tortilla chips, potato chips, and certain fatty spreads and dressings ... one in three averages 45 percent of calories from these foods” (Tufts).

Author Susan Brink discusses how we can say ‘no’ to unhealthy foods “but it’s a David and Goliath fight. We’re battling an entire environment, massive societal change, government policy, and billions of dollars in advertising” (Brink). As the author points out, we are truly in need of a game plan in order to successfully win the battle over eating empty nutritional food that causes more harm than good.

In fighting the battle, switching to healthy food should be taken in small steps. To make the switch, author Dr. William Sears suggests “take it a little bit at a time ... start by eliminating ... the terrible three: partially hydrogenated oils (trans fats), high fructose corn syrup, and any additives with numbers attached, such as red dye # 40. If you do this, you’re 90 percent done with de-junking your diet” (Sears).

Learning about what is in our food, where it comes from, how it gets to us, how it depletes resources that we can’t afford to deplete, how the government plays a role in food availability, why many people are becoming obese, how big business affects the food market, and what we can do to change the role we play in our lives and the lives of others by making better food choices.

Objectives

The objectives of this unit are to create an atmosphere where students can examine human eating habits. The goal will be to give students an opportunity to research and discuss how individual, social, cultural, religious, economic, environmental and political factors influence people’s eating habits and lives.

Communication Standards will be met when students write and respond orally to questions and discussions surrounding the topics in this unit.

Students will have an opportunity to research, analyze, and interpret nonfiction texts as well as practice oral communication skills by sharing findings and opinions.

Strategies

This unit is designed to be a meaningful, relevant opportunity for students to look at topics relating to human eating habits. It is intended to be used as an after school sponsored group program where students voluntarily sign up and a teacher voluntarily leads and facilitates the group meetings. Students will have no pressure regarding a grade. However, students must complete assigned tasks in order to continue to be a part of the group.

Students will read articles, watch two videos, research and share their thoughts through group discussions. Students will be directed to examine ethical and moral relationships between eating, marketing, food availability, etc. Food diaries, menu analysis and creation, topic investigation, self examination, and sharing will be the avenues through which learning will take place.

Classroom Activities

On day one, students will be able to examine their own food consumption by completing a typical day of eating chart and a visual representation of food they eat. Supplies needed for the first task will be food magazines, scissors, glue, poster boards and markers. Students will also be given a journal to record daily food entries.

Day one will continue with students defining individual, social, cultural, religious, economic, environmental, and political factors as they relate to influences on eating habits. Teacher will chart student answers. After this accessing prior knowledge session is complete, then teacher will introduce an article to read aloud regarding definitions to the same terms. The group will then discuss, and teacher will chart the definitions from the article alongside students' prior definitions. Supplies needed are the article entitled "Eating Habits," charting paper, and handout (see Appendix 1).

This session ends with students knowing they must keep food diaries and in addition, trying to analyze what influenced their meals...such as was the food

they ate related to their culture, religion, taste preference, etc. This activity is aligned with PA Communication Standards 2, 3, 5, and 6.

On days two and three, class will begin with students pairing, sharing and comparing one day from their food diary. Class discussion will center on food consumed and questions relating to what influenced their food choices. (Refer to Appendix 1.)

After discussion, class will watch the DVD *Super Size Me* which will continue on to day three due to its length. Keep in mind, this unit is set up to meet once a week during a nine week period therefore food diaries will reflect one week of time since the last class. Also, the movie will have to be recapped before showing the remaining segment.

At the conclusion of the movie, class will discuss the impact of fast food on the American diet. Then we will read a contest winning paper, written by an eleventh grade student, entitled "Super Size Me?" that discusses Morgan Spurlock's movie. The paper can be a spring board for more important discussion relating to the problems of obesity in America. This essay can segway into the next class that will include a visit to the computer lab and the government website called MyPyramid.Gov. Supplies needed for days two and three are the movie *Super Size Me* and the essay "Super Size Me?" by Amy Caveretta. Days two and three activities are aligned with PA Communication standards 2, 3, 5, and 6.

On day four, remind students to keep up with their food journals and then accompany students to computer lab where they can log onto the website. When students arrive at the website MyPyramid.Gov, they will be able to tour the site, log in, and create a personal plan for themselves based on questions they answer. We can discuss how this exercise is a great start for an individual to take responsibility for the food choices that he or she makes. Supplies needed for day four are Internet access and the website to explore which is MyPyramid.Gov. This day's activity is aligned with PA Communication standards 1, 2, and 5.

An assignment for next class meeting is for students to interview family members regarding traditional, cultural or religious food centered events such as holidays. Use Appendix 2 as a possible guide to interview questions.

On day five, students will share their findings regarding the interviews they conducted. As a class, we will chart questions that can act as a guide for further research surrounding practiced religious or traditional food gatherings. Then we will head to the computer lab to continue our investigation. Day five's activities align with PA Communication standards 1, 2, 3, and 5.

On day six, we will read an article entitled, “Moral Indigestion” by Patrick McCormick. Following our read aloud session of the article, we will discuss our role as human beings and how we behave toward food. We will then head to the computer lab and continue our research regarding family traditions. Our objective will be to look at the historical preparation and ceremony concerning holiday feasts versus today’s preparation and ceremony. Today’s activities align with PA Communication standards 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6.

On day seven, we will head to the computer lab again to watch a 45 minute online presentation given by Marion Nestle regarding Food Politics. Discussion regarding the presentation should take place immediately following the conclusion. Today’s activities align with PA Communication standards 1, 5, and 6.

On day eight, we will examine our food diaries. We will share whether our food consumption has changed. What do we think of when we make our food choices? We can then create (again back to the computer lab for research) alternative healthier more responsible menus to follow. Today’s activity is aligned with PA Communication standards 1, 4, and 6.

New assignment is to create a food item that is traditionally made during holidays or family gatherings. A recipe should accompany food prepared.

On day nine, the final class, we will tie up loose ends regarding things we discussed, how we can make a difference in our own lives and the lives of others (including animals) through our food choices. Students will bring a traditional food item for sharing with the group. This can be extended to families if the group decides to do so. Last class activities align to PA Communication standards 3 and 6.

All nine days of class activities are intended to be opportunities for students to practice self examination, self determination, interview skills, research skills, oral communication skills and time management skills. The overall goal is for students to obtain a clear viewpoint on society’s relationship with food and then implement a constructive change in their own lives based on this knowledge.

Teacher Annotated Bibliography

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Student Resources

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on Day six as a spring board for discussion surrounding the individual's role in eating the right thing...morally.

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Eat." Nutrition and Well-Being a to Z. 2007. Advameg Inc. 28 Apr. 2008

<www.faqs.org/nutrition/Diab-Em/Eating-Habits.html>. To be used on day one as an introduction to defining the different influences on food choices.

Websites to visit in the computer lab:

1. MyPyramid.Gov

Use the link below to see the Marion Nestle video that lasts 45 minutes and discusses Food Politics.

2. http://webcast.berkeley.edu/event_details.php?webcastid=9948

Content Standards for the Pittsburgh Public Schools Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1. All Students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, to inform and to persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.

Appendix 1

Food Consumption Chart

(Use this chart as a guide for recording information in your journal.)

Time of Day	What did you eat today?	Why did you eat it? How was this food available to you?
Example of Breakfast	Sausage McMuffin, orange juice, hash browns, water	We stopped at McDonald's on the way to soccer practice. McDonald's is near our house.
Breakfast		
Lunch		
Dinner		
Snacks		

Appendix 2

Possible Questions for Family Interview

1. Who prepares the traditional food?
2. Is this an ethnic food?
3. How long has this food been associated with this tradition?
4. How did the preparer learn to prepare it?
5. What types of spices or herbs are used?
6. Is this food reflective of what is grown or available in your native land?
7. Why do they prepare this particular food for this occasion?
8. What do family members associate with this food?
9. What emotions tie into this food?
10. Is there a story that accompanies this tradition?
11. What is the background for the holiday or event for which this food is prepared?
12. Is there a ceremonial ritual that accompanies the holiday or event?