

## Changing children's eating behaviour through the school food and nutrition environment

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Recently, the number of overweight and obese children in South Africa has risen alarmingly, despite the fact that we still have underweight children. This trend is reflected in adulthood with many overweight and obese people who are at a greater risk of developing chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and certain types of cancer. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to start prevention strategies early in life, with focussing efforts on changing the norms, habits, attitudes and preferences of children, which may be mutable, and which are likely to track into adulthood.

The excess weight that many children carry is usually caused by a lack of regular physical activity coupled with eating too much food, or eating the wrong type of food. The school food and nutrition environment can play an important role in helping children to make healthy lifestyle choices, such as taking part in regular physical exercising and making healthier food choices in the context of their total diet. Schools provide an ideal setting to implement prevention strategies to improve health behaviours along with a possibility of reaching more children at an influential stage of their lives, since they spend plenty of time at school. An added advantage is that school staff, families and community members are reached simultaneously.

Schools should have policies and programmes supporting the adoption of healthy diets and physical activity. However, to enable schools to achieve this they should be equipped with appropriate facilities and equipment for sport and recreation. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that these policies are adopted at the highest level (National and Provincial government) in support of healthier school diets/food which limits the availability of products high in salt, sugar and fats in the National School Nutrition Programme and in tuck shops.

Recognition for “healthy schools”, the school curriculum, the food and physical environment, and health promotion for school staff are aspects that need to be addressed in a healthy school policy framework. The figure below shows specific details on aspects of the school food and nutrition environment which should be addressed at this level.

If changes in dietary habits and physical activity are to be achieved through the school setting, the involvement of stakeholders is of the utmost importance. The figure also highlights the importance of

parent involvement, which could be through interaction with children or through the School Governing Body. Other important stakeholders are government at all levels, (national, regional and local) and the community at large. However, the teachers and other school staff play the important role. Support and buy-in from teachers must be achieved through consultation, easy-to-use curricula, training and health screening.

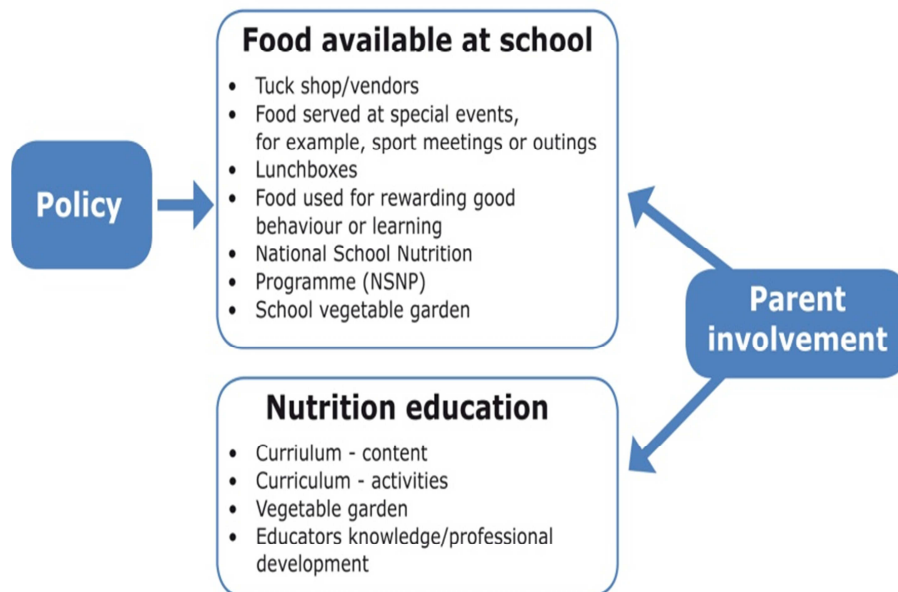


Figure: The school food and nutrition environment

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