Healthy Eating Policy

Ethos Statement

TAO Independent School recognises the critical role that nutrition plays in a young person's physical health, emotional wellbeing, and ability to engage in education. Our healthy eating policy reflects our commitment to meeting the individual needs of our pupils, many of whom may have experienced trauma, sensory sensitivities, of difficulties with food due to past experiences.

Purpose

This policy is designed to:

- Support pupils in developing healthy relationships with food.
- Provide nutritious food options that respect individual dietary needs.
- Use outdoor education to foster an understanding of nutrition, food sourcing, and mindful eating.

Principles

Our approach to healthy eating is based on the following principles:

- **Individualised Support:** We recognize that every pupil has unique needs, preferences, and challenges with food.
- **Trauma-Informed Practice:** We understand that food can be a trigger for some pupils and ensure a safe, non-judgmental environment around eating.
- **Outdoor Learning & Food Education:** We use foraging, bushcraft cooking, and growing food to encourage engagement.
- **Balanced Nutrition:** We promote fresh, whole foods while respecting individual choices and needs.
- **Hydration & Energy Levels:** We encourage regular hydration and provide healthy snacks during activities.
- **Dietary, Allergy & Cultural Considerations:** We respect and accommodate medical, ethical, and religious dietary needs (such as allergies, intolerances,

Halal, vegetarian, vegan and other requirements) to ensure safe and inclusive food practices.

- **Dietary Information & Safety:** Dietary needs, allergies, and cultural requirements are captured during admission processes and clearly communicated to all staff to ensure safe, inclusive food practices.
- Where a pupil has a known allergy or significant medical dietary need, staff must follow the pupil's Individual Allergy Management Plan or healthcare arrangements and the School's Allergy Safety & Anaphylaxis Policy.

Meeting Individual Needs

We support pupils with diverse needs, including:

- **Sensory Sensitivities: Offering** a range of textures and flavors while respecting food aversions.
- **Food Insecurity:** Ensuring all pupils have access to nutritious food, regardless of home circumstances.
- **Cultural & Religious Dietary Needs:** Respecting and accommodating diverse dietary practices.
- **Medical & Allergy Requirements:** Adhering to strict allergy management and medical dietary needs.
- **Eating Difficulties & Emotional Wellbeing:** Providing a supportive, non-pressured approach to food and seeking appropriate family, medical or specialist input where concerns indicate a significant eating difficulty or health risk.
- **Menu Planning & Food Variety:** Menus are planned in advance to ensure balanced nutritional coverage, variety, and suitability for all dietary needs.

Food Provision & Food Guidance

- Pupils are encouraged to bring healthy packed lunches, with guidance provided to families where needed.
- Meals or snacks provided will be nutritious, balanced, and cater to individual needs.
- Staff model healthy eating behaviors without enforcing rigid rules.
- Pupils are involved in preparing food to develop skills, confidence, and autonomy.

Outdoor & Practical Learning

We integrate healthy eating education into outdoor activities, including:

- **Bushcraft & Cooking Skills:** Preparing and cooking food safely in outdoor settings.
- **Growing & Foraging:** Learning about food sources and sustainability.
- **Mindful Eating Practices:** Encouraging pupils to engage with food positively.

Food preparation, cooking and foraging activities are planned and supervised in accordance with relevant food-safety, allergy, risk-assessment and outdoor-activity procedures. Pupils will not consume foraged foods unless staff are competent to identify them and their suitability has been assessed.

Example Healthy Meal

A healthy, balanced meal that could be provided within our provision includes:

Main Course: Wholegrain wraps with grilled chicken, mixed salad, and a yogurt-based dressing.
Side: A portion of fresh fruit (e.g. apple slices or berries).
Drink: Water or herbal tea for hydration.

This meal provides protein, fiber, and essential vitamins while being adaptable for dietary needs.

Staff Training & Implementation

- Staff receive information, guidance or training on healthy eating, trauma-informed approaches to food and allergy safety appropriate to their role, responsibilities and identified pupil need.
- We work in partnership with families and relevant education, health and care professionals to support pupils' nutritional needs.
- Regular reviews ensure that our approach remains flexible and responsive.

Monitoring & Review

This policy will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains aligned with best practices in education, health, and trauma-informed care. Feedback from pupils, families, and staff will inform any necessary adaptations.

Trauma-Informed Approaches to Eating

Understanding Trauma & Eating Behaviours

Trauma can significantly impact an individual's relationship with food, eating habits, and body image. For young people, particularly those with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) or attachment difficulties, food can become a source of control, comfort, or distress.

Common Trauma-Related Eating Behaviors:

- **Avoidance or Restriction:** Fear of food, skipping meals, or extreme control over intake.
- **Overeating or Emotional Eating:** Using food for comfort, security, or self-regulation.
- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Difficulty with textures, temperatures, or specific types of food.
- **Control-Based Eating Habits:** Hoarding food, refusing to eat in front of others, or needing specific routines.
- **Body Image and Self-Worth Issues:** Negative self-perception leading to disordered eating behaviors.

Trauma-Informed Principles for Supporting Healthy Eating

Safety and Predictability

- Establish consistent meal routines to create a sense of security.
- Offer gentle structure, avoiding pressure or forced eating.
- Ensure mealtimes feel calm and low stress in a predictable setting.

Choice and Control

- Provide options for meals (e.g. *'Would you like apples or bananas?'*).
- Allow flexibility (e.g. letting pupils serve their own portions).
- Avoid power struggles around food and respect when a young person isn't ready to eat.

Emotional Regulation and Connection

- Help young people recognise hunger and fullness cues without judgment.
- Offer mindful eating practices, such as noticing textures and flavors.
- Build positive associations with food through social, relaxed mealtimes.

Reducing Food-Related Anxiety

- Normalise different eating habits without shame (e.g. *'It's okay if you're not hungry right now'*).
- Avoid language that promotes guilt (e.g. 'good' or 'bad' foods).
- Be patient with food-related fears or sensory challenges, introduce new foods slowly.

Addressing Food Insecurity and Past Trauma

- If hoarding is an issue, provide access to safe food storage (e.g. a snack box).
- Be aware of past food scarcity, offer reassurance that food is available.
- Consider gentle exposure to new foods through sensory play or outdoor cooking.

Practical Strategies for Outdoor and Therapeutic Settings

Outdoor Cooking & Bushcraft

- Cooking over a fire can create a positive, grounding experience around food.
- Allow hands-on involvement; gathering, preparing, and cooking food builds connection and trust.
- Use natural settings to reduce mealtime stress and promote mindful eating.

Eating in Nature

- Outdoor meals can remove the traditional pressure of a dining table setting.
- Encourage group meals in relaxed environments (e.g., picnics, campfires).

Movement Before Eating

- Gentle physical activity (walking, stretching, mindfulness) can regulate emotions before meals.
- Adventure activities help with interoception (awareness of hunger/fullness signals).

Responding to Eating Challenges with a Trauma-Informed Approach

Behavior	Possible Trauma Root	Trauma-Informed Response
Refusing food	Need for control, anxiety, past food-related trauma	Offer choice, avoid pressure, allow snacks later

Eating too quickly	Past food insecurity, hypervigilance	Reassure that food is available, encourage mindful eating
Overeating	Emotional regulation difficulty	Provide other comfort strategies, avoid restrictive language
Sensory avoidance	Sensory processing difficulties	Allow alternative textures, respect preferences
Hoarding food	Fear of scarcity, past neglect	Provide access to safe food storage, reassure availability

Key Takeaways for a Trauma-Informed Approach

- ✓ Prioritise safety, choice, and predictability.
- ✓ Validate emotions around food without judgment.
- ✓ Use outdoor and nature-based approaches to make eating feel safe and positive.
- ✓ Foster trust; food is about more than nutrition, it's about connection and healing.

Mindful Eating Practices for Pupils

Mindful eating is a practice that helps pupils develop a healthier relationship with food by focusing on the present moment, recognising hunger and fullness cues, and engaging all the senses while eating. This is especially important for young people with trauma histories, emotional regulation difficulties, or negative associations with food.

Benefits of Mindful Eating for Pupils

- Encourages a healthy relationship with food.
- Reduces stress and anxiety around eating.
- It helps with emotional regulation and self-awareness.
- Improves digestion and enjoyment of meals.
- Promotes body awareness and self-compassion.

Trauma-Informed Considerations

- Create a safe and predictable eating environment.
- Avoid pressure and allow pupils to engage at their own pace.
- Normalise different eating behaviours without judgment.
- Encourage, but don’t force, mindful eating techniques.
- Use outdoor or non-traditional settings to reduce stress.

Practical Mindful Eating Strategies

1. The Five Senses Exercise

- Encourage pupils to observe their food using all five senses before eating.
- Ask questions: What does it look like? What textures can you feel? What sounds do you notice when chewing?

2. Slowing Down

- Encourage taking smaller bites and chewing slowly.
- Suggest putting utensils down between bites to increase awareness.

3. Hunger and Fullness Awareness

- Help pupils recognise body cues for hunger and fullness.
- Use a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = starving, 10 = overly full) to reflect on their eating patterns.

4. Gratitude for Food

- Ask teens to consider where their food comes from (farm, environment, people involved).
- Encourage a moment of appreciation before eating.

5. Outdoor Mindful Eating

- Take meals outdoors to create a calming environment.
- Encourage eating in silence for a few minutes to heighten sensory awareness.

Group and Individual Mindful Eating Activities

Food Exploration

- Provide different foods and encourage pupils to describe them using all their senses.
- Use words like crunchy, smooth, bitter, sweet, warm, cool, etc.

Outdoor Eating Experience

- Take a meal or snack into nature.
- Encourage quiet observation of surroundings while eating mindfully.

Food and Emotions Journal

- Have pupils keep a journal of their eating experiences and emotions before/after meals.
- Use visuals, words, or symbols to express feelings.

Breathing Before Eating

- Guide a short breathing exercise before meals to promote relaxation.
- Encourage three deep breaths before taking the first bite.

Key Takeaways

✓ Mindful eating fosters a positive and healthy relationship with food.

✓ It helps pupils develop self-awareness and emotional regulation.

✓ Creating a trauma-informed approach ensures a safe, non-judgmental experience.

✓ Outdoor settings can enhance mindfulness and reduce mealtime anxiety.

Legal & Statutory Framework

This policy has been developed with reference to the following legislation and guidance:

• Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (as amended), where relevant

• Food Safety Act 1990

• Food Safety and Hygiene (England) Regulations 2013

• Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 • Equality Act 2010

• Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026

• DfE School Food Standards and healthy-eating resources, used as good-practice guidance where applicable

• Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (2015), where relevant

• Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, including allergy safety provisions, noting the developing application of equivalent requirements to independent schools
• DfE Allergy Safety in Schools statutory guidance 2026, followed as relevant good practice pending implementation of equivalent independent-school regulatory requirements

Version Updates

Version	Date	Author	Review / Changes	Approved By
2.0	09/09/2026	Daniel Giblin	09/09/2027	Headteacher / Proprietor