

Activity # 1

The Meaning of Food

(Grades 3-5)

Description:

Students will learn the ways in which food allows us to connect with others like family and friends, in many meaningful ways.

Objectives:

1. Explore the relationship between food, family, and community.
 2. Develop a deeper understanding of the many ways that food helps people connect with each other.
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Material List:

- 1) Dry erase marker or chalk
 - 2) Smart Board or Chalk Board
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Time: 10 minutes

Activity:

1. Begin by asking the class to think of the different ways that food brings people together, or is the main component of an activity, holiday, function, or event. Examples: Family meals, birthdays, Christmas dinner, Thanksgiving dinner, church or temple dinners, community gardens, parties, cooking together, etc.
2. Continue to build upon the idea of food as the ultimate connector by asking the class think about all the different ways that food plays a role in their lives. Examples: food provides nutrition, energy, life, and is a way to demonstrate love (think cooking a meal for a family member). It also is a vehicle of expression for cultures, faith, and traditions.
3. The following are a list of extra questions to further launch the discussion and to help brainstorm ideas.
 - Do we eat food for reasons beyond nutrition?
 - Do you think that we ever express love with food?
 - How do you think that hunger might impact an individual's ability to connect with a community of people?
 - What role does food play in your family's culture or traditions?
 - Why is it that when we first visit a different country or region, tasting the food is often one of the first things that we do?
 - Why do we bring food to families that are grieving, or families that are celebrating? What is comfort food?

Activity #2

The Three Pillars of Food Security

(Grades: 3-5)

Description:

Students will read five accounts about hunger in New Jersey, and then reflect on what pillar of food security is in question in said story. These stories will help students better understand the pillars of food security, and what might cause a pillar to be threatened.

Objectives:

1. Students will read five accounts about hunger in the United States.
 2. Students will summarize and categorize each of these stories.
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Time: 20 minutes

Activity:

1. Begin by going around the class, and asking each student when was the last time they felt hungry. Ask them how they felt, and to describe the feeling they get in their stomach. Explain the difference between these two types of hunger:
 - **Momentary Hunger:** A physical feeling of discomfort that signals your body's need for food. For example, that feeling that makes you want to get a snack.
 - **Chronic Hunger:** Consistently not getting enough of the right kinds of foods to meet one's needs. For example, if a certain person could not buy the right amount of food to meet their needs for weeks on end, they would be suffering from chronic hunger. Unfortunately, chronic hunger can affect multiple generations. When one generation suffers from food insecurity (say the parents), it is very likely that their kids and grandkids will also suffer from food insecurity. In fact, 20% of children all around the world are undernourished.
 2. Pass out the excerpts to the class. You will find the stories attached on a separate page. Have students read the stories aloud to the class, and then ask students questions to summarize the stories on the board.
 3. Draw the three pillars of food insecurity diagram on the board. You will find an image of the diagram attached on this document. Briefly describe each of the pillars.
 - **Food Accessibility:** All people can reach and afford the food available in their area.
 - **Food Availability:** Enough food for all people is produced or imported in an area.
 - **Food Knowledge:** All people know how to get and use the food in their area.
 4. Help students decide if the hunger described in the story is caused by availability, accessibility, or knowledge problems. Use the following questions: "Is there enough food for everyone?" "Can everyone get food?" "Does everyone know how to get and use their food?" If the story falls under multiple categories, help the students decide which category seems to be the biggest issue in the story.
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1. Ann's family moved to New Jersey last year. Ann has four brothers and sisters, and her dad is always working super-duper hard. Unfortunately, his job doesn't pay enough money to feed his big family. There are five kids in total! It's hard to pay for things like rent and utility bills each month, but it's even harder to find any money for food. Unlike most families, Ann's family doesn't have enough money to buy lots of food at the grocery store. **Did you know that 77% of people who are hungry in New Jersey often choose between paying utilities or buying food?**

2. Emilio was born in Mexico. Last year his family moved to New Jersey. Emilio's dad works home repair jobs as much as he can. It's been hard for him to pursue a career because of the language barrier: he doesn't speak English. Emilio's family doesn't always have enough food. Emilio's mom heard from some of the parents at school that there are places that help families in need of food. However, she is very unfamiliar with the area and doesn't know how to ask for directions, so she can't find them.

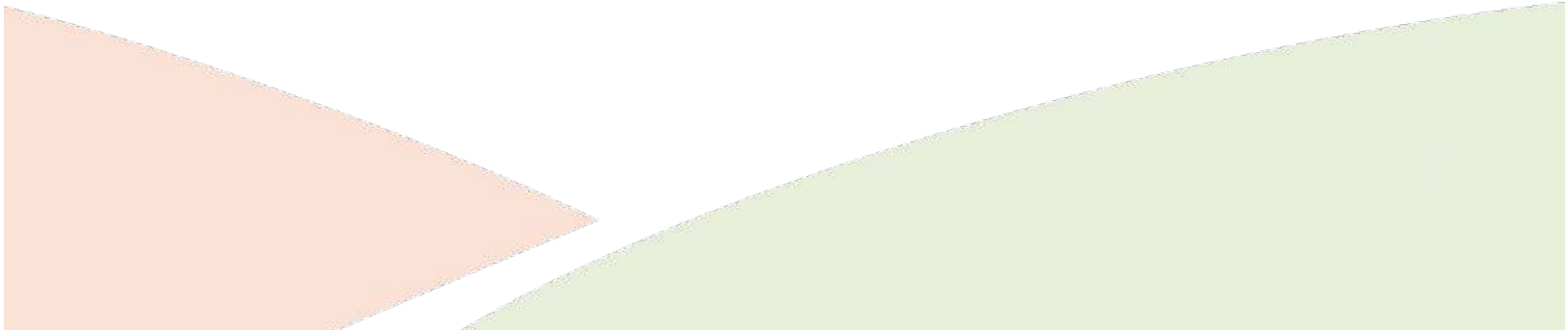
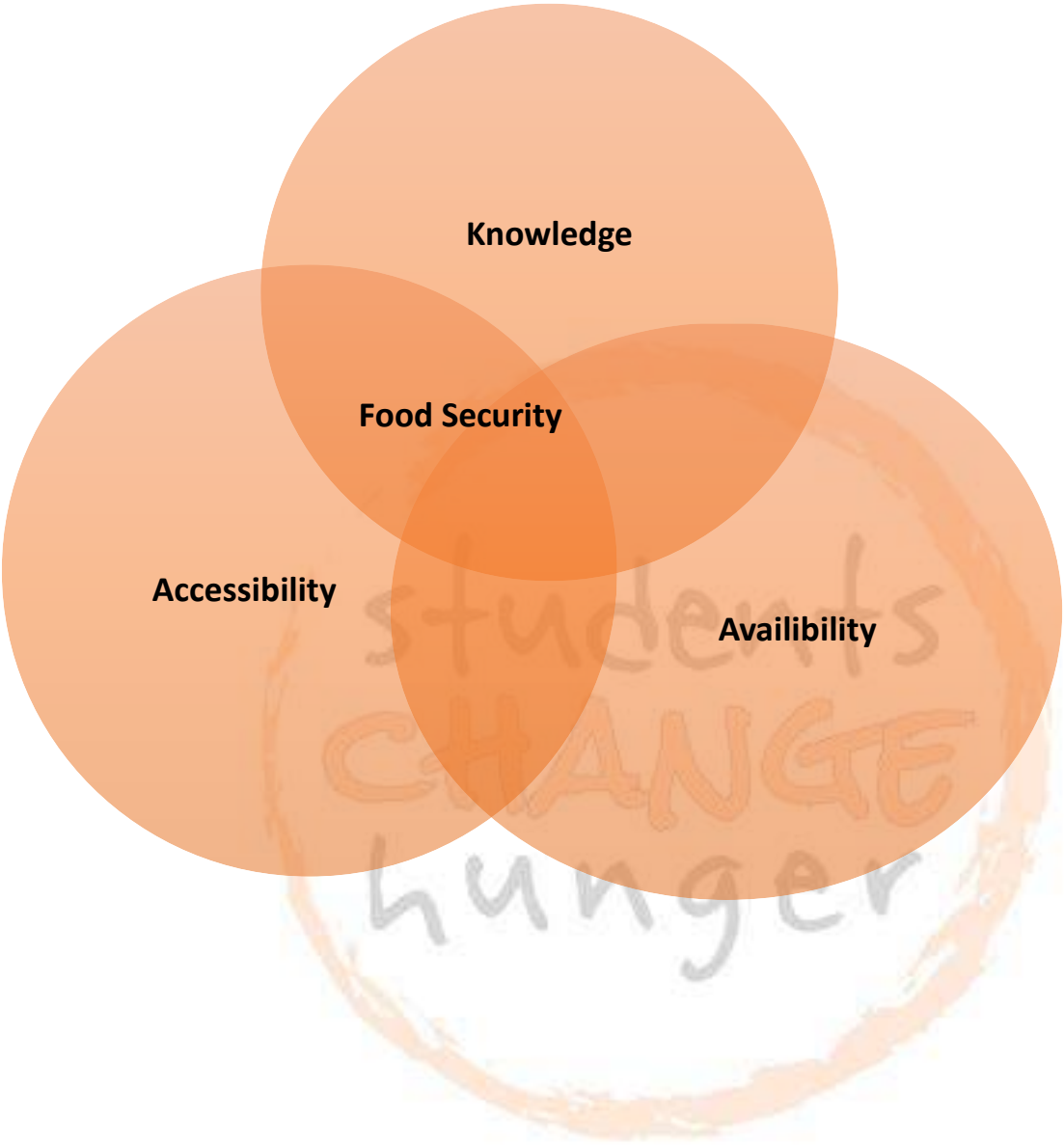
3. Ben's grandfather was a farmer, but Ben doesn't know very much about running a farm. He and his wife moved onto the family's old farm. They want to grow their own food and sell the extra to pay bills. They didn't know how difficult it would be to take care of their crops, and they haven't been able to grow enough food for themselves. They have no income to pay their bills and live far away from the nearest grocery store, and with limited gas money to make long trips. They have very little money to spend on groceries.

4. Daniel is seven years old and just started the second grade. His favorite subject is mathematics and he's super good at it! When Daniel doesn't get enough to eat, his stomach is always growling and it's very hard for him to concentrate. His parents both have jobs, but they do not pay very well, and often times his parents don't have enough money to buy the food needed to support his family. **74% of families in need of food have at least one member of the household that works.**

5. Summer vacation just started! Most kids would be super excited for this time of year. There's no school which means no homework! Unfortunately for Nelly, this is the most stressful time of year. She lives with her mom and baby brother, and her mom was let go three months ago. Nelly's mom can only work two day every week at her new job, and all the money she makes must go to utilities, rent, and gas. It's always been hard for her mom to find grocery money, but the summer is the worst for Nelly because she doesn't get to eat breakfast and lunch at school. **450,000 students qualify to receive food at summer programs. Yet, only 81,000 know where and how to get that food.**

Food Security Diagram

(you can also draw this on the board and quiz your students on the three pillars of food security)



Activity #3

What Causes Hunger in New Jersey?

(Grades 3-5)

Description:

This activity will help students understand the problem of hunger in New Jersey. Specifically, the activity helps students grasp the root cause of hunger. Discussions can be adapted depending on the grade level.

Objectives:

Students will learn about:

1. The unequal distribution of food.
 2. The relationship between poverty and food distribution.
 3. The definition of food insecurity and hunger.
 4. The root cause of hunger, and common myths associated with why people go hungry.
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Time: 20 minutes

Materials and Teacher Preparation: (For a group of 25)

Bag of Goldfish (foods that kids can easily identify tend to raise the stakes in this activity). 25 (lunch) paper bags.

Distribute:

- 8 bags – 5 goldfish, 5 carrot sticks, or 5 jolly ranchers (or any type of snack).
 - 8 bags– 10 goldfish, 10 carrot sticks, 10 jolly ranchers (or any type of snack).
 - 8 bags – nothing.
 - 1 bag – 30 goldfish, 20 carrot sticks, 20 jolly ranchers (or any type of snack). Make sure this bag is filled.
 - Paper/Markers.
 - World map.
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Procedure:

1. **Give** out snacks.
Pass out one of the 25 stapled lunch bags to a student, containing a snack. Divide the bags in such a way that about an equal number of students receive none, small, or moderate amounts of snacks, and only one student receives the very large amount.
2. **Ask** students to open the bags, and then ask them what happened. Allow the students to react, and then ask them to design a more equal distribution system. Some students may refuse to share, which you can use to point out the difficulty of getting people to come together and share resources like food.
3. **Explain** that the paper bags are a metaphor for the uneven distribution of food in our world. Discuss the feelings of the students who received either a small or very large portion of the snack.
4. **Review:** definitions of hunger and food security.
 - **Hunger:** A condition in which people do not get enough food to supply nutrients (carbohydrates, fat, protein, vitamins, minerals and water) necessary for productive, active lives.
 - **Food Security:** The state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. The ability to personally acquire acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way.
5. **Ask** if the students who received less food wanted to take somebody else's food?

Activity # 4

Common Misconceptions About Hunger

(Grades 3-5)

Description:

Students will brainstorm and list the different groups affected by hunger and food insecurity, and then discuss myths surrounding the hungry and the poor. Finally, students will explore the reasons for the increasing percentage of people living in poverty and suffering from hunger.

Objectives:

1. Identify the groups affected by hunger.
 2. Discuss the major barriers that prevent people from obtaining food
 3. Dispel myths and stereotypes surrounding food insecurity.
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Materials:

- Blank sheets of paper
 - Pens or pencils
 - Colored Pencils
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Time: 20-25 minutes

Activity

1. Create groups of 3-5 people. Then, give each student a piece of paper, a pen or pencil, and a box of colored pencils to share. Instruct the groups to write down and draw as many groups of people that go hungry, and the reasons that might cause them to go hungry. For example, this might include but is not limited to the elderly, children, immigrants, or the disabled
2. Have each group pick a spokesperson to write their groups ideas on a list on the chalkboard or whiteboard. Label one list “group”, and the other list “reasons for hunger” so that each list may correspond. You should add to the students’ original ideas as needed to cover all groups in the attached list, but do not limit the discussion to the outlined groups.
3. Ask the class to draw some of the negative things that people say about those who go hungry on their sheets of paper. Then, begin to discuss two of the most prevalent myths concerning hunger in the United State.

The First Myth: “People are hungry because they are too lazy to work.”

- Explain that many people who suffer from hunger are in fact working, going to school, or applying for jobs, but simply do not make enough money to purchase an adequate supply of healthy food. Inform them of the following statistic: 47% of household’s that the Community Food Bank of New Jersey serves has at least one member who had been employed in the past year.

The Second Myth: “Most of the world’s hungry live in Africa.”

- The majority of the world's hungry do not live in Africa, but in the Asia Pacific region. Approximately 553 million hungry people live in Asia and the Pacific. Approximately 227 million live in Africa, 47 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 16 million in developed countries like the United States.

4. The key focus of this activity fall on the following question: What other things do you believe are true about poor people, homeless people, or people who might use a food pantry? List the student's thoughts on a chalk board or white board, and as a class talk about which tend to be true and which tend to be stereotypes.

Explanations for why people might go hungry

Children: Poverty, neglect, lack stable family or familial support

Senior Citizens: Poverty or limited finances, lack of transportation and social support, physically debilitating limitations and chronic illness, expensive medical bills

Homeless: Poverty, few resources, no facilities to maintain or cook food, low skill levels, chronic illness, injuries, social stigma

Acutely or Chronically ill: Physically weak, inability to physically prepare food or eat solid food, or shop, special dietary needs, expensive medical bills

Physically Challenged: Difficulty preparing meals, lack of transportation, medical bills

Substance Abusers: Cost of addictive substance (drugs or alcohol), loss of appetite and motivation when using drugs

Unemployed Mentally Challenged: Poverty or limited finances, demoralization

Undocumented Immigrants: Low wages, language barriers, no access to government aid and extreme prejudice, stigma

Runaways: Constantly changing housing, limited finances, lack of family resources and support, lack of stable home, lack of emotional support

Under educated: Inability to attain high wage jobs, inability to apply for assistance, inability to compete in the workforce

Under employed- Working Poor: Minimum wage is simply not a livable wage. The ever increasing costs of both housing and childcare (inflation) have made it virtually impossible for a low wage earner, otherwise known as the working poor, to afford basic necessities like food, water, and medicine. Often times, food needs are cut with the pressure to pay for housing. Homelessness is much more frightening for families than going days without an adequate food supply.

Activity # 5

What Are the Consequences of Hunger?

(Grades 3-5)

Description:

Students will learn to identify and discuss the manners in which hunger impacts both health and behavior.

Objectives:

1. Increase awareness of the impact of hunger.
 2. Identify specific health and behavioral consequences of hunger, and food insecurity.
 3. Discover ways that hunger might impact the students own setting/environment.
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Time: 15-20 minutes

Activity:

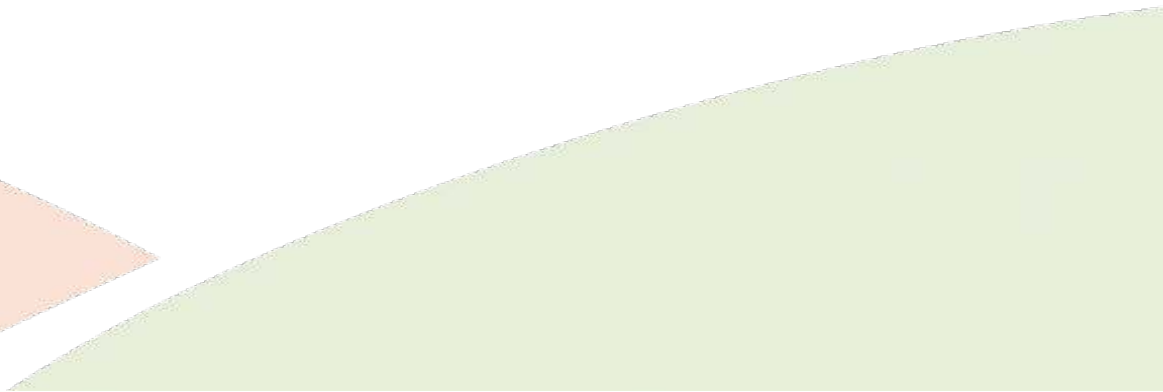
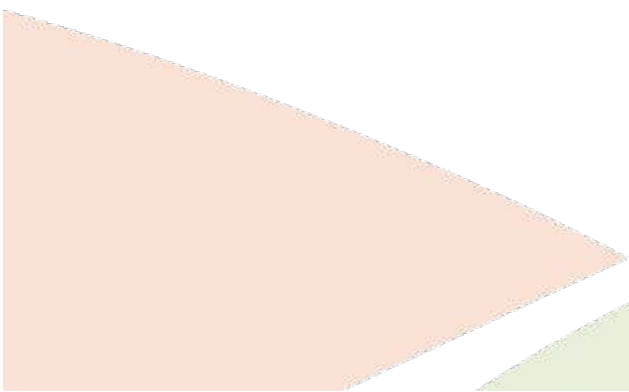
1. Make two columns on a chalkboard/whiteboard/smartboard, and label one column “health” and the other column “behavior”.
 2. Begin by asking students to consider the health and behavioral consequences of hunger. Ask the students how their own behavior—ability to learn, play sports, concentrate, hang out with friends—might be impacted if they were hungry. Ask the students how they might act if they were hungry (this is a fun way to get the kids engaged). Examples: holding stomach, grunting, feeling sleepy, inability to pay attention or be engaged.
 3. Attached on the next sheet are many health and behavioral effects.
 4. The following are discussion questions to help further engage the class:
 - a. Are you surprised by any of these consequences of hunger? If so, why?
 - b. How do these consequences impact a community, school, or family? How do your siblings act when they get hungry?
 - c. What are some of the community and government responses to hunger that can help prevent these consequences?
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Health Consequences: Emotional and Physical

1. **Children** who are hungry often experience: headaches, fatigue, and frequent colds.
 2. **Undernourished pregnant women** tend to have babies that weigh less. Low birth weight babies suffer from physical illness, impaired growth and development, and suffer from a greater risk of dying within their first year of life.
 3. **Chronic hunger in adults** tends to weaken bones and muscles, and also increases the risk of getting sick. Even more, hunger may affect adults emotionally by contributing to depression and a lack of energy or motivation.
 4. **Children and adults** with limited access to fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods may have an increased risk of suffering from obesity and/or diabetes.
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Behavioral Consequences:

1. Children who are hungry are often less attentive, independent, and curious than their classmates. Due to these consequences, many underfed children may lack developed reading, verbal, and motor skills.
2. Hunger in adults also creates behavioral problems, like nervousness, irritability, and an inability to concentrate.
3. Hunger can also have serious emotional impacts, as it contributes to a diminishing self-confidence and self-esteem. Children and adults alike love the feeling of independence, especially as independence is a reinforced cultural value, and so those suffering from hunger may be hesitant to see help.



Activity # 1

Roots of Hunger

(Grades 6-12)

Description:

Students will learn about the unequal distribution of food in the world, even in places like New Jersey.

Objectives:

1. Increase awareness of the impact of hunger.
 2. Identify ways in which current systems support this unequal distribution of food.
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Materials:

1. Approx. 50 Healthy Snacks (raisins, grapes, pretzels, etc.)
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Time: 15-20 minutes

Activity:

1. Select a healthy snack (raisins, grapes, pretzels), and divide it into paper bags according to the following distribution pattern. Staple each bag closed.
 - Group 1: 1 student in this group. He or she will receive 1 bag with 50 snacks.
 - Group 2: A third of the class. Each student gets a bag with 10 snacks.
 - Group 3: A third of the class. Each student gets a bag with 5 snacks.
 - Group 4: A third of the class. Each student gets a bag with 1 snack.
 2. Explain to the students that they are going to receive a snack and direct them to refrain from opening their bags. Pass out one bag to each student. When everyone has received a bag, instruct the students to open the bags.
 3. Ask the students what happened. After listening to the student's initial shock and laughter, tell the students that they have a few minutes to figure out a system in which every student has the same amount of snack. The goal is to work out a way to share the snack as a group.
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Discussion Points:

- This exercise approximates the distribution of wealth and food in our society.
- How did you (the student) feel when you realized that the snacks had been unevenly distribute?
- How does the large gap between rich and poor in our society contribute to malnutrition and hunger for many people? Is there a way to resolve this issue?

Activity # 2

Stretching the Family Budget

(Grades 6-12)

Description: Students will learn about, and create a family budget for a family of three (two adults and one child).

Objectives:

1. Foster an understanding of what goes into planning a family budget.
 2. Allow students to recognize that budgeting for food can be very difficult for families, especially low income families.
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Time: 20-25 minutes

Activity:

1. Explain to the students that they will be working to create a family budget for a family of three (two adults and one child) that live on a very tight income.
 2. Hand out copies of the Family Budget Exercise sheet, group students into pairs, and begin to go over the family's budget in column 1. Explain to the students that each pair will be role-playing the parents. Assign the pairs one of three situations, and give the pairs time to develop a new budget.
 3. When this activity is completed, have the students form groups of four and share their family budget with the new groups.
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Discussion Questions:

1. If you were in this situation, how would you cut costs to try and save money?
 2. What influenced your budget-making decisions? How did you feel while making them?
 3. What similarities and differences did you find when you shared budgets with your group?
 4. To what extent is minimum wage a livable wage? What improvements do you think could be made to improve the system?
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Following one of the three situations below, redesign your family's budget in the second column, taking into consideration that you have no savings because each month you must spend all of your income on necessities for you and your family.

Typical Monthly Expenses	Column 1	Column 2
Rent - 2 Bedroom Apartment	\$700	
Phone	60	
Groceries	500	
Childcare	700	
Utilities:		
Gas and Electricity	110	
Water/Sewer/Garbage	40	
Transportation (2 bus passes)	100	
Entertainment		
Medical Insurance	340	
Clothing & Laundry	100	
Other		
Total Expenditures	\$2650	
Monthly Income	\$2666	
Leftover money	\$16	

Situation # 1: Your child is sick, and the doctor's visit and medication cost an extra \$300 this month, in addition to what you pay for your insurance. What will you cut back on to pay for the medical bills.

Situation # 2: Having lost your job, the unemployment checks that you now receive are only equal to about half of your regular pay. Your total month income decreased by \$580; what will you do to balance your budget?

Situation # 3: Your childcare provider has raised the daily watching rate for your child. It will now cost \$800 a month for child care; what will you choose to spend less money on so that you can afford childcare?

Activity # 3

Obesity and Malnutrition: Two sides of the same coin.

(Grades 6-12)

Description: Students will learn about the ways in which hunger and food insecurity contributes to both obesity and starvation.

Objectives:

1. Foster an understanding of how food insecurity can contribute to two extremes: undernutrition and overnutrition.
 2. Discover what components of food contribute to healthy life styles, and what components of food lead to obesity.
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Time: 20-25 minutes

Activity:

1. Ask students what types of health problems they believe each of the children in the pictures provided are suffering from. Explain that both children suffer from malnutrition: a health condition that results in an imbalance between the body's needs and its intake of nutrients. This can lead to syndromes of deficiency, dependency, toxicity, or obesity.
 2. Show the students the NYC Public Health ad of soda turning into fat. Ask for reactions, and discuss the price difference between health/unhealthy foods.
 3. Pass out the reflection sheet and have the students write out their responses to the prompts.
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Discussion Questions:

1. What's in food that's so vital? Starvation: severe reduction in vitamin, nutrient, and energy intake. Obesity: condition that can exist simultaneously with hunger if people are not eating foods that are rich in vitamins, nutrients, and energy.
2. How do you think soda can cause obesity? Soda: all sugar with no vitamins or nutrients and oversupplied with sugar. What does the body do with all of this excess sugar? The body takes that excess sugar and turns it into fat.

Malnutrition Photos



NYC Soda Ad

students
GET
er

ARE YOU POURING ON THE POUNDS?

DON'T DRINK YOURSELF FAT.
Cut back on soda and other sugary beverages.
Go with water, seltzer or low-fat milk instead.

NYC Department of Health & Mental Hygiene
Thomas Farko, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner

Cartoon and Prompts for Students



Prompt # 1: How does this cartoon link poverty to different types of malnutrition?

Prompt # 2: Why do you think most people don't view obesity as a sign of hunger?

Prompt # 3: What problems do you think these stereotypes of poverty might cause?

Activity # 4

The Grocery Trip

(Grades 6-12)

Description: Students will learn about what goes into planning a nutritious menu for a family, and the costs associated with a nutritious meal.

Objectives:

1. Foster an understanding of the cost of planning a nutritious meal and how difficult it can be to plan a nutritious meal when on a budget.
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Time: 20-25 minutes

Activity:

1. Divide students into four groups, and explain that they are going to be planning a nutritious menu for one day for their family. Tell them that they have five minutes to choose their menu, and that each group will eventually present its menu to the rest of the class. If the teacher(s) want, they can make a make-shirt grocery store in the classroom, and give out fake money.
 2. Give out the Grocery Trip handouts to the groups, and give each group a different family. Tell them to do the calculations on the bottom of their menu. Encourage the students to work only within their groups and to not share answers with the other groups.
 3. Ask each group to present the number of people in its family, the grocery budget, and the menu they created. Ask them to also explain the ease or difficulty they had in making decisions related to their menu.
 4. Write the phrases 'Enough Food' and 'Healthy Food' on the board, and have the students list the pros and cons of each differing priority.
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Discussion Points:

1. On a scale of 1-10 how nutritious do you think this meal is? If you had to eat this menu every day, how do you think it would affect your body?
2. What do you think it feels like as a parent to know that you can't afford to buy your children healthy food?

Activity Materials:

There are five people in your family. You have \$18 to spend on food for one day. How can you use this money to provide a nutritious menu for your family?

Breakfast for 3 people

Cereal, fruit	\$2
Frozen waffles, eggs, fruit	\$3
Toast	\$1

Lunch for 3 people

Cheese sandwiches	\$2
Turkey sandwiches, apples, cookies	\$4
PB&J sandwiches, carrots	\$3

Dinner for 3 people

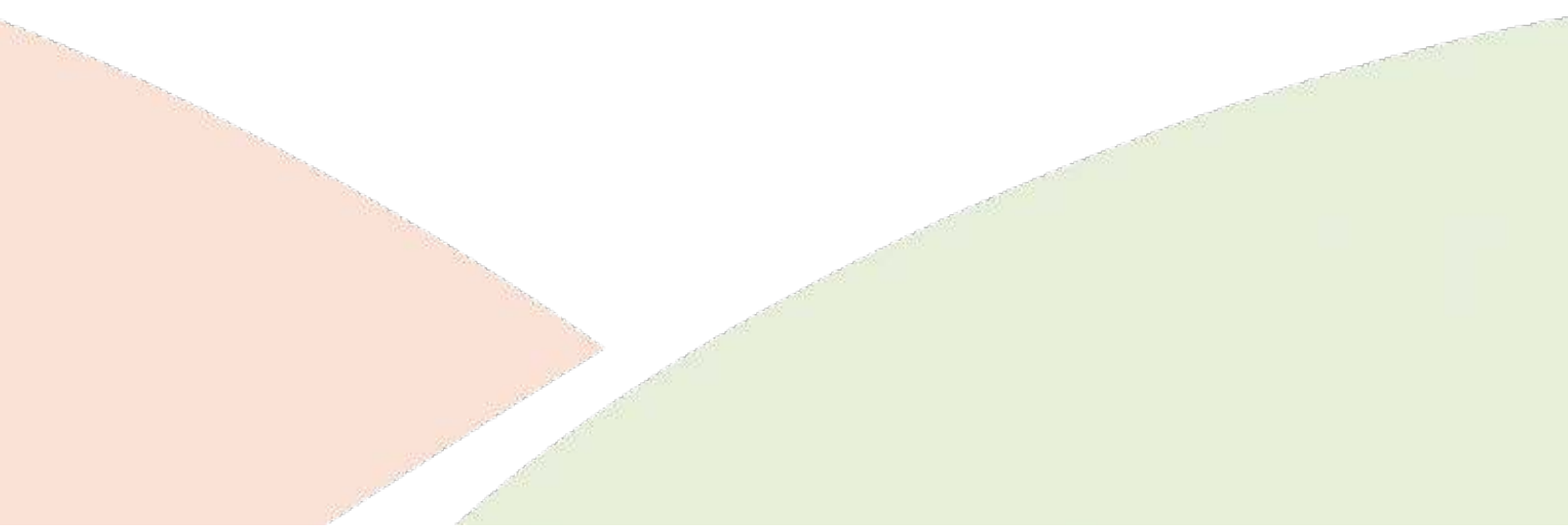
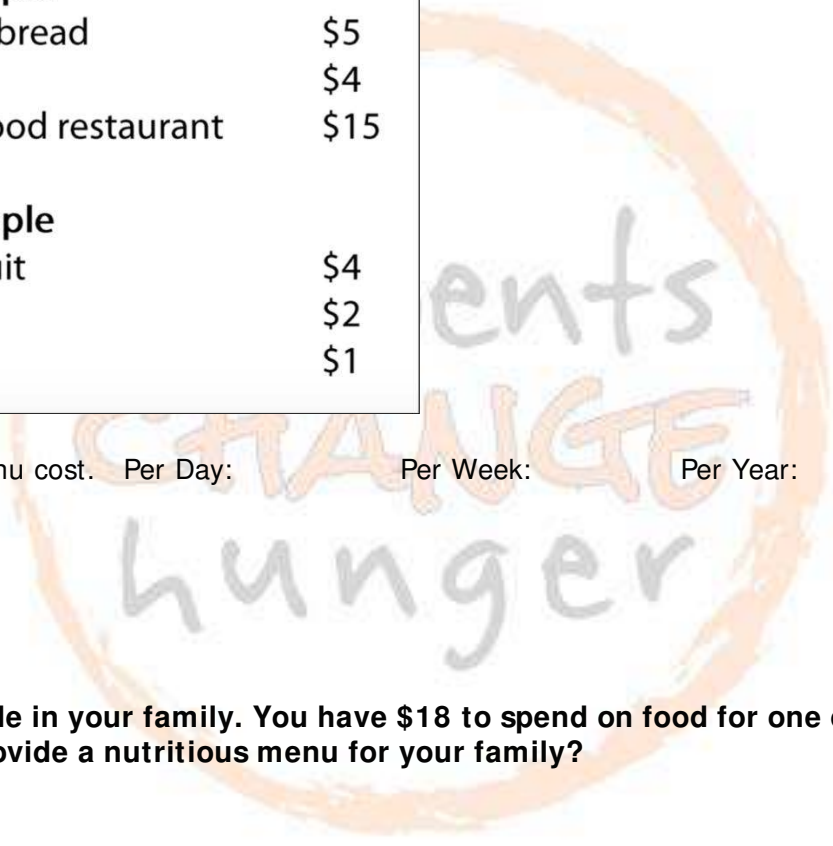
Spaghetti, salad, bread	\$5
Hot dogs, soup	\$4
Dinner at a fast food restaurant	\$15

Snacks for 3 people

Three types of fruit	\$4
Cheese, crackers	\$2
Chips	\$1

How much will your menu cost. Per Day: _____ Per Week: _____ Per Year: _____

There are three people in your family. You have \$18 to spend on food for one day. How can you use this money to provide a nutritious menu for your family?



Breakfast for 3 people

Cereal, fruit	\$2
Frozen waffles, eggs, fruit	\$3
Toast	\$1

Lunch for 3 people

Cheese sandwiches	\$2
Turkey sandwiches, apples, cookies	\$4
PB&J sandwiches, carrots	\$3

Dinner for 3 people

Spaghetti, salad, bread	\$5
Hot dogs, soup	\$4
Dinner at a fast food restaurant	\$15

Snacks for 3 people

Three types of fruit	\$4
Cheese, crackers	\$2
Chips	\$1

How much will your menu cost. Per Day: Per Week: Per Year:

There are four people in your family. You have \$8 to spend on food for one day. How can you use this money to provide a nutritious menu for your family?

Breakfast for 3 people

Cereal, fruit	\$2
Frozen waffles, eggs, fruit	\$3
Toast	\$1

Lunch for 3 people

Cheese sandwiches	\$2
Turkey sandwiches, apples, cookies	\$4
PB&J sandwiches, carrots	\$3

Dinner for 3 people

Spaghetti, salad, bread	\$5
Hot dogs, soup	\$4
Dinner at a fast food restaurant	\$15

Snacks for 3 people

Three types of fruit	\$4
Cheese, crackers	\$2
Chips	\$1

How much will your menu cost. Per Day: Per Week: Per Year:

There are four people in your family. You have \$32 to spend on food for one day. How can you use this money to provide a nutritious menu for your family?

Breakfast for 3 people

Cereal, fruit	\$2
Frozen waffles, eggs, fruit	\$3
Toast	\$1

Lunch for 3 people

Cheese sandwiches	\$2
Turkey sandwiches, apples, cookies	\$4
PB&J sandwiches, carrots	\$3

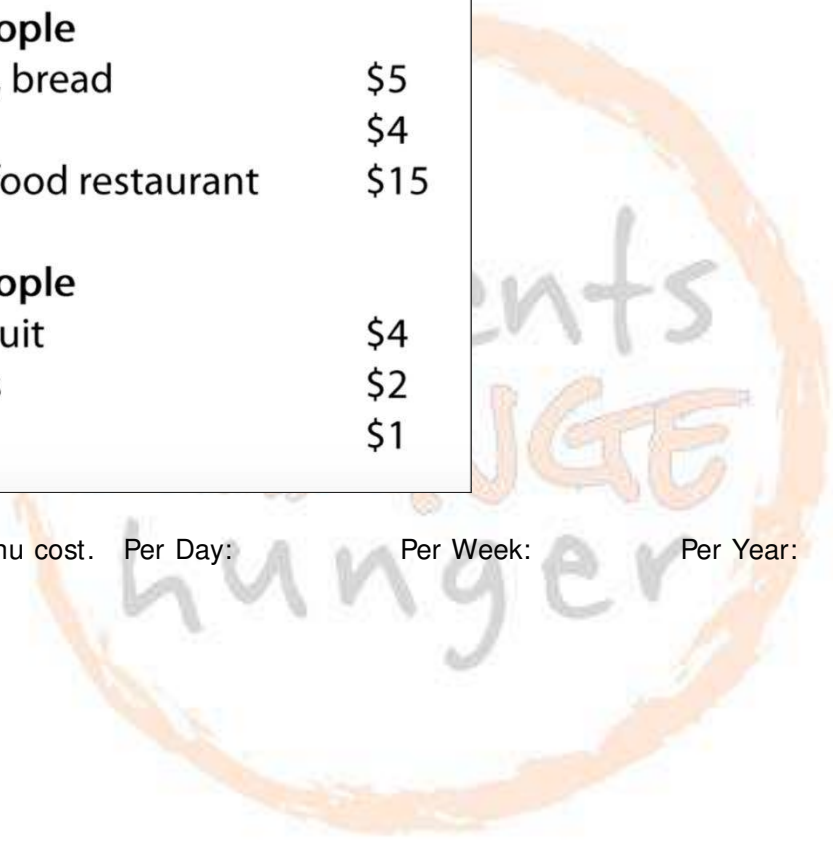
Dinner for 3 people

Spaghetti, salad, bread	\$5
Hot dogs, soup	\$4
Dinner at a fast food restaurant	\$15

Snacks for 3 people

Three types of fruit	\$4
Cheese, crackers	\$2
Chips	\$1

How much will your menu cost. Per Day: Per Week: Per Year:





Activity # 5

Picturing Hunger

(Grades 6-12)

Description: Students will learn about the individual choices and external situations that might lead to hunger, and about the stereotypes surrounding hunger.

Objectives:

1. Help students separate the individual choices from the external factors that contribute to hunger.
 2. Allow students to understand the stereotypes surrounding hunger, and help students dissect “food stamp culture”.
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Time: 20-25 minutes

Activity:

1. Draw an outline of a person on the board, and have students share examples of individual choices and external situations that might lead to hunger. Write the individual choices inside the outline and the external situations outside the outline.
 2. Read the included blog post “Food Stamp Etiquette: Human Kindness” and discuss it with the class.
 3. With the students, brainstorm various ideas on how they can address some of the causes of hunger. Suggest having a fund raiser for a local food bank, donating clothing to a family shelter, working at a soup kitchen, or helping at a community garden.
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Discussion Questions:

1. What are some examples of individual choices that might lead to hunger? (High school dropout, drug addictions, relocating to a new area, fleeing domestic violence). What are some of the external situations? (severe illness, lost job, on the job injury, no affordable housing, low wages).
 2. What do you think the person represented by this outline probably looks like? What do you think are some of the stereotypes surrounding hunger? Did the author of “Food Stamp Etiquette” make any points that you’d never thought of before?
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Excerpts from Blog Post: “Food Stamp Etiquette”

This is now officially the first month in two years that my family has not been depending on food stamps to feed ourselves. The moment that I realized that I no longer qualified for these benefits was incredibly triumphant for me. Within the same moment of celebrating I also felt so incredibly thankful. I have no idea how my family would have existed without this kind of supplemental assistance to purchase food. Currently over 45 million families use food stamps – that is roughly 15% of the population of the United States.

Chances are you know someone beyond me that was on (or is currently on) food stamps.

With that in mind I wanted to put together a small list of lessons learned while I was on food stamps:

1. **Not all grocery stores accept food stamps (also called EBT cards).** I always found it embarrassing/ stressful to find a cashier or customer service person before shopping to ask them. Many times I have had to pull W out of the buggy and leave a store because I could not get groceries there. 97% of the time the response was given in kindness, 3% of the time my answer was given gift wrapped in judgement.
2. **Judgment. It's everywhere.** This was always a shock to me. There is a moment after you ring up your groceries when the cashier sees that you have a plastic card. They ask, "debit or credit?" You have to reply, "EBT" (electronic benefit transaction) – it's a change in the atmosphere – it's subtle – but I felt it often enough to recognize it. Judgement. Not every cashier, not every store. But often enough that I knew which stores and which checkout lines to avoid.
3. Parallel to judgment, there are **people that will attempt to shame you** for being on food stamps. Heard the phrase "entitlement mentality"? Yup, that's shaming.
4. **Making food stamps "chic" is offensive.** I can't tell you how awful it is to see someone writing about their creative menu planning for the month and saying it is an homage to the sort of budgeting that one has to/ should do while on food stamps. There are tons of sites that dedicate posts to "food stamp challenges" or "snap challenges" and while I get the desire to create a challenge for yourself or your own family, at the end of the day if you need to buy one more carton of milk beyond your budget chances are that you can. One day I'll ask a friend if I can tell you the story about the "Hobo themed" wedding as it illustrates why this sort of "shabby chic" aspect of poverty is hurtful.
5. **Blanket assumptions about why a family is on food stamps don't help anyone.** The truth is if you qualify for the benefits then you need them. It is an incredibly tedious process to apply for state benefits – I know because I have lived in three states while my family recovered from our own personal economic/situational knock-out.

Many months ago a friend on twitter tweeted that she was behind a woman at a checkout line and the woman was paying with food stamps and she had a DESIGNER PURSE!!!! OMG!! Because, you know, the nerve of that lady! This is such a common knee jerk reaction that so many people have. Having been on food stamps I see the world differently.

If I saw a woman with a designer purse paying with her groceries with food stamps my thought would probably be, "nice bag!"

Because, guess what, we don't know what is up in this woman's life. We don't know her beginning, middle, where she is now. We don't know if the purse is real, we don't know if the purse was one of the last things she purchased for herself before her life took a turn, we don't know if the purse was a gift, we don't know if the purse was something that she set aside \$10 every week for a year in order to buy.

So because we know none of these things – why is the first thought something akin to, "shame on her for daring to have a nice purse when she is on food stamps." Because the thought that isn't far from that one is, "she doesn't deserve it, she isn't worthy."

There is a spotlight on you when you shop with food stamps – it is undeniable. You are very much aware that at some point the person behind you is probably judging the name brand of milk on the conveyor belt, making note that you didn't buy any meat...

One of the most powerful moments I ever had in a grocery store happened recently. The checkout clerk had finished ringing up my groceries and when he saw my plastic card he mistook it for a credit card. When I corrected him to let him know that I needed to use EBT to purchase my groceries I flushed – it was always embarrassing to talk about it, always- he simply shrugged and said quietly, “my family and I are on them too. No Big deal.”

No big deal.

