



Identifying Chronically Hungry Children

School Pantry is for students who are food insecure and who are not getting sufficient food outside of school on a regular basis. The following information is provided to help define a “chronically hungry” child.

Food Insecurity: If a child does not get enough food outside of school he/she is considered “food insecure.” The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as *households that are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet basic needs of all their members because of insufficient money or other resources.* When the guardian of a child has to choose between food and other necessities, e.g., having electricity shut off because they don’t have enough money, it is an indicator of food insecurity.

A child will not necessarily tell you that he doesn’t have enough food at home, but through observation you can begin to see patterns and/or behavior that will set them apart. How do you identify a hungry child? Here are some examples:

A chronically hungry child will be anxious for a meal to be served. Perhaps they rush the cafeteria line or show up early for breakfast. During the meal they will eat all of the food, not being picky in what they have placed before them. One indicator of hunger is that a child cleans his plate and will not carelessly throw portions of it away. They will also linger around for second helpings or even ask for more.

- Rushing food lines
- Extreme hunger on Monday morning
- Eating all of the food served
- Lingering around for seconds, or asking friends for uneaten portions

How to respond to a child who says he is hungry:

If child complains about being hungry, it does not automatically mean they are food insecure. Generally speaking, growing teens have an appetite and will say they are hungry often throughout the day. However, in the case of a chronically hungry child, certain questions can be asked to assess need. In the morning a student may say they are hungry. Ask them if they ate breakfast. If they are eligible for free or reduced price breakfast then make sure they are taking advantage of this program. If they say they skipped breakfast find out why. Ask if they had enough food in their house or if it was just the case that they woke up late and didn’t have time for breakfast. If they did eat breakfast, ask what they ate and if it was enough to make them full. You may also ask if they ate dinner the previous night. Once again ask what they had for dinner and if it was enough to fill them up.

By asking a few pointed questions you should be able to assess whether or not this is just a case of normal hunger (where your stomach growls in anticipation for food – not because of a series of involuntary missed meals) or whether this seems to be a frequent incident that results because of food insecurity (the inability to afford enough food). Obviously a child who says there is never enough food in the house or that all they had for dinner were some potato chips is the child who is considered chronically hungry. Any child who exhibits this behavior should be considered a candidate for access to the School Pantry.

- Assess hunger through further questioning
- Determine reason for not eating

- Ask what they ate

Apart from recognizing food insecurity, physical appearance, school performance and home situation are secondary indicators that help confirm chronic hunger.

Physical Appearance:

Certain physical features are indicators of vitamin and/or food deficiencies. A child who is very thin and whose bones are starting to protrude may have a lack of protein and calories. Obesity can be an indicator as well, although it seems counterintuitive, food insecure households often buy calorie dense, inexpensive foods to make their food budget stretch, contributing to obesity. Please keep in mind that the weight of a child isn't always a sure indication of food insecurity. Any of these physical signs should bring a concern and prompt further questions.

- Extreme thinness or obesity: lack of protein and calories, or poor nutrition/high calorie diet
- Puffy, swollen skin: protein deficiency
- Chronically dry, cracked lips: dehydration
- Chronically dry, itchy eyes: vitamin A deficiency
- Frequent illness – sore throat, common cold, stomach ache, ear infection, fatigue, etc.

School Performance/Behavior:

Sometimes the behavior of a child indicates problems at home, with food insufficiency being one of the problems. By observing some of the following it may help in identifying chronic hunger:

- Excessive absences/tardiness – due to sickness or unexcused
- Hyperactive, aggressive, irritable, anxious, withdrawn, distressed, passive/aggressive
- Repetition of a grade
- Difficulty in forming friendships, getting along with others
- Short attention span, inability to concentrate

Home Environment:

Sometimes students will be very open about what is going on at home. For example a child may say that her dad has lost a job and that the mother doesn't work. By listening to your students and by being in contact with parents the needs of the family can be assessed, which in turn can help determine whether or not the child needs access to additional food. A single parent family where the parent works on the weekend is probably a situation in which the School Pantry could help a child who may be responsible for fixing their own meal. The School Pantry is designed for students who are not able to get sufficient food at home due to neglect or other circumstances preventing them from having regular access to food, such as students or families that are homeless or in transition.

- Lack of food resources
- Parent unable to prepare meals
- Student caring for younger siblings
- Teen parents

Any student with multiple risk factors as listed above should be considered for access to the School Pantry.