# Health Promotion and Improvement Schools Newsletter

May 2026

Supporting healthy, active school communities

## *Welcome!*

As we come to the end of another busy and rewarding school year across the Dublin Midlands region, this newsletter highlights the ongoing commitment of schools to supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

In this issue, we explore a range of important topics including national health and wellbeing supports for schools, guidance around vaping among young people, resources to support parents, and practical advice on healthy eating and staying active.

We also focus on the importance of sun safety as we move into the summer months, and invite schools to share and celebrate the great work taking place across their communities.

Thank you to all principals, teachers and school staff for your continued dedication and leadership throughout the year. Wishing you a very enjoyable and well-deserved summer break.

Karen Heavey
Health Promotion and Improvement Manager
HSE, Dublin and Midlands Region

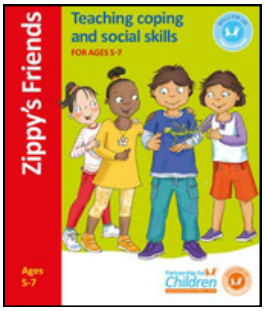


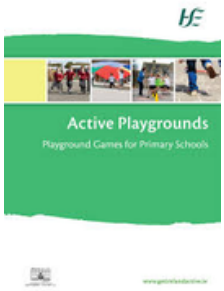
**Health Promotion Resources**

Visit www.healthpromotion.ie for a wide range of posters, books, leaflets and other resources on health and wellbeing for children and young people. All you need to do is visit the site, create an account, and start ordering. All resources are free to download or order for delivery straight to your school.

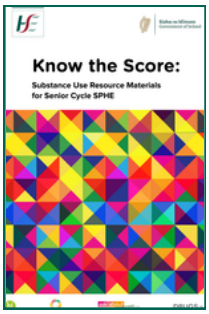


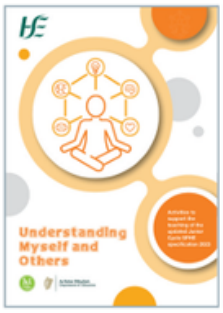
# HSE Health and Wellbeing Education Programme














We are delighted to offer a range of evidence-based training programmes to support both primary and post-primary schools in promoting health and wellbeing across the school community. These trainings align with guidance from the HSE and the Department of Education, supporting a whole-school approach to wellbeing.

## Primary School Training Programmes

At primary level, **Zippy's Friends** is a well-established programme designed for children aged 5–7 years. Delivered over 24 sessions, it supports the development of social and emotional skills through topics such as feelings, communication, relationships and conflict resolution. The programme helps children to recognise and talk about their emotions while learning positive coping strategies for everyday challenges. Schools can access a 1-day in-person training to support implementation, while a 2-hour online option is also available for teachers with prior SPHE experience. Zippy's Friends has been widely evaluated both in Ireland and internationally, making it a valuable addition to the SPHE curriculum.

Also at primary level, **Wellbeing through Physical Activity** is a 1-day, in-person training that promotes a whole-school approach to movement and activity. It introduces practical resources such as Get Your School Walking, Active Playgrounds and Get Active in the Classroom, helping schools to embed physical activity throughout the school day.

Our new **Whole School Food Policy Development** training supports primary schools in creating or reviewing their food policies. This 1-day session guides participants in understanding the school food environment, applying Irish healthy eating guidelines, and engaging the whole school community in policy development. Schools will leave with practical tools and a draft action plan to ensure consistent healthy eating messages across the school.

## Post-Primary School Training Programmes

At post-primary level, **Know the Score** is the first national, evidence-based resource on alcohol and drugs for Senior Cycle students (15–18 years). Developed collaboratively by the HSE, the Department of Education and Drug and Alcohol Task Forces, it includes 14 interactive lesson plans. Training is available as a 1-day in-person session or a 2-hour online workshop to support teachers in delivering the resource effectively.

**Skills for Facilitating SPHE** is a comprehensive 2-day post-primary training focused on building teacher confidence and competence in SPHE delivery. It explores effective methodologies, classroom environment, and the use of up-to-date HSE resources to support student wellbeing.

Finally, the new **Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing** in SPHE is a 1-day post-primary training designed to enhance teaching approaches in this critical area. It supports teachers to deepen their understanding, explore practical methodologies, and access further supports while fostering a collaborative learning environment.

### Training Communications

Training communications will be issued directly to school principals via their email address, or to the email address registered with the Department of Education.

# Young People and Vaping

Vaping has quickly become a significant public health concern for children and young people. Research conducted by Ipsos B&A for the HSE shows that exposure to vaping can begin early—often from first year, and in some cases even earlier.

What makes vaping particularly concerning is how normalised it has become. Bright packaging, sweet flavours, and targeted marketing can make vaping feel like a rite of passage for young people, masking the very real risks associated with nicotine addiction.

## What the Data Tells Us

Findings from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) highlight the scale of the issue:

- 1 in 3 students have tried vaping
- 1 in 5 students are current users
- 1 in 13 students have tried nicotine pouches

Young people who vape are also more likely to go on to smoke cigarettes later in life.

## Why It Matters

Nicotine is highly addictive, particularly for developing brains. Regular vaping can lead to:

- Increased anxiety and reduced attention
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Changes in brain development
- Long-term dependence on nicotine

Some vaping products may contain nicotine levels equivalent to up to 20 cigarettes, and the exact content is often unclear. Early exposure can have lasting impacts on health and wellbeing.

## The Role of Schools

Schools play a vital role in helping students make informed, healthy choices. A whole-school approach—supported by SPHE, wellbeing policies, and clear substance use guidelines—is the most effective way to address vaping.

Creating a culture that promotes healthy habits, open discussion, and critical thinking is key to supporting young people.

## Starting the Conversation

The HSE encourages open, non-judgemental conversations with young people. Helpful approaches include:

- Talk about health risks in a clear, age-appropriate way
- Explain nicotine addiction and how it develops
- Explore marketing tactics used to target young people
- Ask open questions rather than giving lectures
- Be a positive role model

## Tips for Talking to Young People

- Ask what they think about vaping and why people their age might use it
- Listen first—understand their perspective
- Discuss reasons like peer pressure, curiosity, or stress
- Help them think about how to respond in social situations
- Reinforce confidence in making their own choices

## Further Support

The HSE provides a range of resources for schools, parents, and young people, including information on:

- Types of nicotine products
- Health risks and warning signs
- Practical conversation tips

👉 Visit: HSE Supports

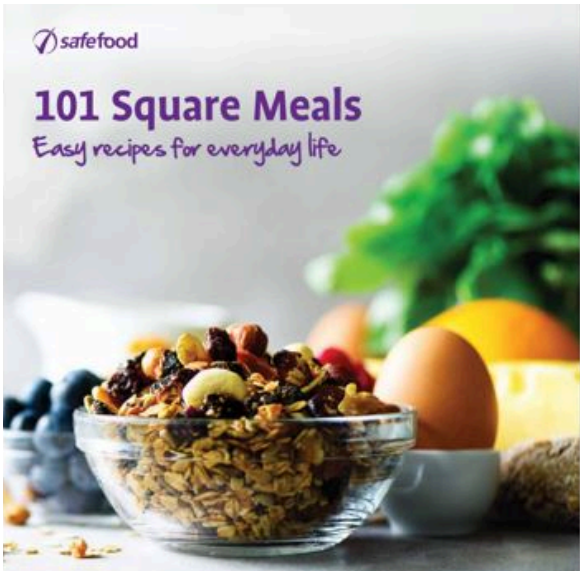








# Healthy Eating for School-Aged Children: A Fresh Summer Approach




As the summer months arrive, bringing longer days and more outdoor play, it's the perfect time to refresh children's eating habits and focus on healthy, balanced meals. Building good nutrition into daily routines supports growth, learning and energy levels—especially important for school-aged children enjoying active summer days.

Healthy eating doesn't have to be complicated. The **HSE Healthy Eating for Families** guidance highlights the importance of offering a variety of foods from the main food groups each day. A balanced plate should include fruits and vegetables, wholegrains like bread or pasta, dairy foods, and sources of protein such as meat, fish, eggs or beans.

During summer, this can be made fun and colourful—think fresh fruit salads, crunchy veggie sticks, or wholemeal wraps packed with chicken and salad. Bright colours on the plate often mean a wider range of nutrients, helping children stay healthy and energised.



Hydration is equally important, especially in warmer weather. Children should drink plenty of fluids throughout the day, with water and milk being the best choices. Sugary drinks should be limited, as they can affect both dental health and energy levels.

Summer also offers great opportunities for family meals and outdoor eating. Picnics, barbecues and day trips can all include healthy options. Preparing food together—like assembling sandwiches or fruit skewers—can encourage children to try new foods. The HSE notes that children may need to try foods several times before accepting them, so patience and variety are key.

The **Safefood Education Resources** also provide excellent tools for families and schools, including healthy lunchbox ideas, games and activities that promote positive attitudes to food. These resources emphasise that developing healthy habits early can support lifelong wellbeing.

Regular meals and snacks help keep children fuelled for play and learning. Experts recommend three balanced meals and 2–3 healthy snacks each day, such as fruit, yogurt, or wholegrain crackers. A good breakfast is especially important, giving children the energy they need to start their day strong. Find more information on **Helping your Child to Eat healthily.**

It's also important to strike a balance. Treat foods like sweets or crisps don't need to be completely avoided, but should be enjoyed occasionally rather than every day. Encouraging moderation helps children develop a healthy relationship with food.

Finally, summer is a great time to lead by example. When children see adults enjoying a variety of healthy foods, they are more likely to do the same. Eating together as a family, whenever possible, can make mealtimes enjoyable and help build positive habits that last a lifetime.

By making small, simple changes and using trusted supports like HSE and Safefood resources, families can make healthy eating a natural and enjoyable part of every summer day.

Tune in to the **HSE Health and Wellbeing podcast,** where a range of episodes explore all aspects of healthy eating—from practical tips to expert insights.

# The Role of Schools in Sun Safety for Health Protection & Promotion

Skin cancer is one of the most common cancers with over 11,000 cases diagnosed annually and this number is projected to double by 2045 in Ireland. Sunburn during childhood in particular increases the risk of developing skin cancer as an adult. Data shows that UV exposure during the first 10 -15 years of life contributes disproportionately to adult skin cancer.

So, what role can schools play in promoting sun safety for students, staff, and the wider school community? Schools that support sun safety provide long-term value by
- protecting students from sunburn and
- reducing their lifetime risk of skin cancer.

As children's and young adolescents' skin is highly sensitive and children spend a significant amount of time outdoors during peak UV radiation hours (11am to 3pm), school-based programmes are crucial for fostering lifelong healthy habits.

Here are just some actions schools can take to play their part in keeping their students SunSmart;

- **Education:** Schools can teach children the knowledge and skills necessary to practice sun safety throughout their lives through the SunSmart 5 S's: Slip, Slop, Slap, Seek, and Slide. They can also teach students about the severe, long-term dangers of using sunbeds and that it is illegal for anyone under 18 to use, hire or buy a sunbed.

- **Curriculum Integration:** The HSE's NCCP has developed SunSmart lesson plans and activity sheets for SPHE (Safety and Protection). These provide teachers with ideas and materials to support the integration of sun protection education and behaviours into the classroom. This ensures that students receive age-appropriate instruction on the importance of sun protection and how to incorporate sun safety practices into their daily lives. Hard copies of the resources are available to order on www.healthpromotion.ie/products or can be downloaded here:

SunSmart Primary School Lesson plans - junior infants to second class

SunSmart Primary School Lesson plans - third to sixth class

- **Peer-Led Initiatives:** Involving students in leadership roles to manage sun protection for the school community at appropriate times.




- **Model Good Behaviour:** When staff and teachers practice sun safety, they provide a positive example to students and parents.

- **Official Recognition:** Schools can apply for free, recognised accreditation as a "SunSmart Primary or Secondary School". The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) can provide a SunSmart Schools Toolkit for your school with information, resources and support to become a SunSmart School. By completing some simple steps your school could be recognised and accredited by the HSE's NCCP for their role in protecting students and reducing their lifetime risk of skin cancer. The pack is available to order or download in English or Irish by clicking here.

For more information on the SunSmart campaign visit www.hse.ie/sunsmart

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# Good to Know: Parenting Resources

For teachers in primary and secondary schools, navigating the diverse needs of students often involves being aware of the challenges of parenting these days. The HSE provides a range of evidence-based parenting resources designed to bridge the gap between home and school life, fostering better emotional and behavioural outcomes for students.

The cornerstone of HSE parenting support is the MyChild.ie platform. While often associated with early childhood, it offers a wealth of "common-sense" tips and expert advice applicable to school-aged children.

- **Primary Focus:** Resources like the My Child: 2 to 5 years guide provide foundational advice on development and behaviour that remains relevant as children transition into junior infants and beyond.
- **Practical Support**: Teachers can direct parents here for guidance on topics like back-to-school transitions, choosing suitable school bags, and managing common health issues like head lice or persistent coughs.

In Sláintecare areas — 19 identified high-need areas including Ballyfermot, Clondalkin, Athy and Athlone — a range of programmes are available to support parents.
Evidence-Based Programs:

- **Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme):** Focuses on positive relationships and managing behaviour for parents of children aged 2-15.
- **Parents Plus:** Offers structured courses covering child and adolescent development, including specialised courses for ADHD or special needs.
- **Community Mothers Programme:** Home visiting supports for parents of young children.
- **PEEPS:** Focuses on early learning and language development.

**Focus Areas:** Programmes aim to support mental health, positive emotional wellbeing, healthy eating, and routine setting (screen time, behaviour).

**Targeted Programmes and Courses**

The HSE frequently partners with or funds external organisations to deliver structured parenting courses that address specific developmental stages:

- Parents Plus: This Irish charity offers evidence-based programmes for families with children of all ages. Many of these, including the ADHD children's programme and the Special Needs Programme, are supported in Slaintecare Healthy Communities locations. The Sláintecare Online Referral System can be accessed here.

**Specialised Support for Complex Needs**

When students face significant hurdles, the HSE offers specialised pathways for parents:

- Additional Needs: Detailed advice is available for parents of children with disabilities returning to school, including tips on using "social stories" to manage anxiety.
- Crisis and Counselling: The HSE provides information on accessing extra support for families dealing with bereavement, relationship breakdown, or chronic illness.

Evidence shows that when parents utilise these positive parenting tools, it can prevent issues such as anxiety and depression in students. Teachers often report "corresponding improvements in behaviours and social interactions" in the classroom when parents engage with these HSE-supported programmes.
By familiarising yourself with these resources, you can provide parents with trusted, professional starting points for support, ultimately creating a more stable and supportive environment for your students to learn.

# Physical Activity

Schools play a very important role in the overall health of their students. On average a child or young person spends between 23-30 hours per week in school, much of which is sedentary desk-based work. Including physical activity throughout the school day and week is key to supporting optimised health. Habits built early can last a lifetime and it is very important that the habit of physical activity is encouraged through your school's wellbeing policies and activities.

There are numerous benefits of regular physical activity for growing children. In terms of physical health it develops cardiovascular fitness, increases bone density, improves muscle strength, and aids in maintaining a healthy weight. It also improves mood, boosts self-confidence, reduces stress, and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression. School performance is enhanced by improved focus, memory, and cognitive flexibility, leading to increased academic achievement and improved brain function. Childhood is a key time for making friends and building social networks and cooperation. Physical activity builds teamwork, cooperation, and communication skills, especially through team sports or group play. Overall, physical activity supports lifelong healthy habits and reduces the risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

However, despite all the evidence about the importance of physical activity, according to the Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study (CSPPA) remarkably 77% of children do not meet the recommended guidelines for physical activity.



To combat this, a whole-school approach is recommended to help students achieve the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day This doesn't have to take place all at once and can be broken down into intervals throughout the day.

The Wellbeing Through Physical Activity Training is a one-day in-person workshop provided by the HSE for primary teachers. It is designed to foster a whole-school approach to physical activity, providing teachers with practical resources like Get Active in the Classroom, Get Your School Walking, and Active Playgrounds to integrate movement throughout the school day. This is one of the most popular workshops in our training calendar and provides fantastic resources for teachers to bring back to school to start the next day.

It encourages creating opportunities for physical activity beyond traditional PE, supporting mental health, concentration, and self-esteem. Attendees receive resources focused on active classrooms, school walking initiatives, and making playgrounds more active. It is aimed at primary school teachers, with SNAs often invited to attend, though substitution cover is typically for teachers only.
It is a valuable training workshop for coordinators working toward the Active School Flag.
Registration is generally managed through HSE Health Promotion or local education centre portals with substitution cover available for schools. Emails will be sent directly to principals regarding bookings for the next academic year, so please keep an eye out.

At post-primary level it is important that the gains and habits of physical activity continue into adolescence and beyond. Adhering to a whole-school approach to physical activity ensures that movement is not confined to the PE hall but becomes a natural part of the adolescent school day. This is effectively supported by the Active School Flag Post-Primary (ASFPP) framework, which encourages schools to move beyond seeing physical activity as the sole responsibility of one department.

## Share Your Success – Celebrate Health & Wellbeing in Your School

We know there is fantastic work happening in schools to support health and wellbeing, and we would love to help share and celebrate it.

We are inviting teachers and schools to take a few minutes to share successful programmes, initiatives or ideas that you have implemented in your school. Whether it's a wellbeing initiative, an SPHE project, a physical activity idea, or a whole-school approach that has made a difference—we want to hear about it.

This is an opportunity to highlight:
Successful health and wellbeing initiatives in your school

- Experiences of delivering programmes or trainings
- Creative ideas that have engaged students
- Approaches that have worked well in practice

Your stories and examples could be featured in future newsletters, helping to showcase the great work taking place across schools and inspire others.

Your input will also help us to better understand what is working well and how we can continue to support schools in a practical and meaningful way.

If you would like to share your experience, please complete the short feedback form at the link below.
👉https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/B08HY7/_

## Quit Smoking This Summer

If you or someone you know is ready to quit smoking, the HSE Stop Smoking Service is here to help. We offer a free, evidence-based programme that supports individuals and groups to quit smoking.

With 20 clinics across Dublin and the Midlands, as well as virtual support via phone or video, the service is designed to meet your needs—wherever you are.

The programme includes free behavioural support along with access to Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT), such as gum and patches, or other smoking cessation medications. Sessions typically take place over six weeks, with follow-up support at 12, 26 and 52 weeks, all tailored to the individual.

To find out more or to book a consultation, visit
👉 QUIT Dublin Midlands

Explore our HSE Dublin Midlands Health Promotion Padlet for practical resources, training supports, campaigns, and wellbeing materials for schools and communities.
👉 HSE Dublin Midlands Health Promotion Resources Padlet




Check out the weekly HSE Talking Health and Wellbeing Podcast here.

Check out the latest edition of the National HSE Health and Wellbeing Ezine here.