

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO

the **Food Justice** Books for Kids Series



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INTRODUCTION



The Food Justice Books for Kids Series began in 2020 with a single book, *Lulu and the Hunger Monster*TM. That story's focus is on the challenges of food insecurity and how it impacts a girl called Lulu, her family, her classmates, and her teacher. I knew it was important to write a book that dealt with the subject sensitively and also offered solutions. The book won a Social Justice Literature Award and was published in a bilingual English/Spanish version.

Yet even when I was conceiving the Lulu book, I also knew I was only telling part of the story. For kids to grow up to be food literate and nutritionally healthy, they need more. They need to understand that it is not just about always having enough to eat but having enough healthy food to eat. Once kids understand this concept, they are ready to consider the wider food system and their place in it, so that we can all support each other in building communities where everyone has access to healthy food.

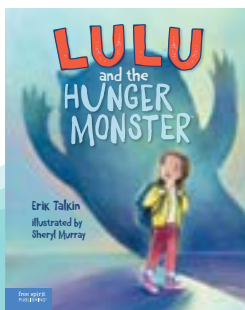
Now that larger story is here with the arrival of two more books, *Jesse and the Snack Food Genie* and *Frankie versus the Food Phantom*.

Jesse's story looks at healthy eating for kids and families and the need to balance snack foods with healthier alternatives. Frankie's story looks at understanding the local food system and how each of us can get involved in it, in ways such as planting a community garden.

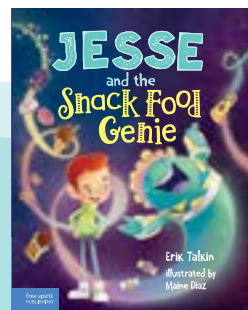
As this Leader's Guide explores, you may introduce and work through each book in somewhat different ways. However, all three offer opportunities to build empathy, understanding, and food literacy skills among your students. And to find out more about the books, you can also visit the series website at FoodJusticeBooksForKids.com.

Erik Talkin

Progression of understanding through the three books



Immediate Need



Family Need



Community Health

LULU AND THE HUNGER MONSTER™

A Note About the Story

Lulu sometimes feels alone in her battle with a monster no one else can see or hear, whose name she's afraid to say out loud.

Yet she is not alone.

According to Feeding America, one in seven children in the United States may be skipping a meal today or going to bed hungry tonight.

That is the backdrop for this story of a determined girl confronting a monster called hunger.

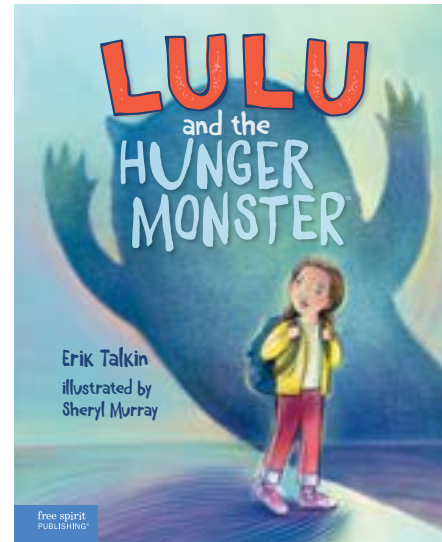
The inspiration to write Lulu's story came from my work with families and food pantries to which the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County distributes healthy food. It can be difficult for those who have not experienced food insecurity (which means periods of not having enough money to buy nutritious food) to comprehend how someone in their own community—especially someone who has a job—would not be able to prioritize buying food for their family. To many people, it's shocking . . . and a little bit scary.

Yet 40 percent of Americans are one missed paycheck or unforeseen financial difficulty away from food insecurity or poverty (scorecard.prosperitynow.org). A broken-down car or an unexpected medical bill can throw the family budget out the window. Then food is often the only thing that can be cut. Expenses such as rent, transportation, and utilities are relatively fixed, while food is one of the few family budget items that is elastic. And healthy food may be the first thing to go, as it is often more expensive than poorer quality, less healthy, less nutrient-dense food.

I know firsthand that even in situations of intense hardship, people are often reluctant to ask for help, and that the pressure and stress faced by children in food insecure families can lead to lifelong challenges, physically and emotionally. By personifying hunger, this book destigmatizes and makes visible something that is often hidden.

Often, teachers find themselves on the front lines against childhood food insecurity. I have spoken to many educators who have tearful stories of hungry students and the responsibility teachers feel to supply food as well as to try and help these kids in other ways.

Identifying hungry kids in school and offering assistance without stigmatizing them, whilst empowering their peers to be empathetic and helpful, is a lot for a teacher and class to accomplish. I wanted to see a book that would spark a conversation among the youngest members of our communities about how they might empathize with the problem, provide practical help, and—one day soon—find a long-term solution. It is my passionate hope that discovering this solution can begin with something as simple as reading *Lulu and the Hunger Monster*.



Helping Food Insecure Students

Using this book and this guide with your class presents both a significant challenge and a powerful opportunity, because you will be speaking to a dual audience, each with its own needs: students who are food insecure and need assistance with that challenge, and students who are not food insecure but may need practice building their empathy and understanding.

Both groups need a kind of help, and both groups may have to be gently guided into accepting that help.

At the most fundamental level of helping students grasp and discuss these ideas, you can be upfront about the reality that some people—likely including people your students know—struggle with food insecurity, while others don't. You can also begin from a place of understanding that feelings of hunger are universal. You might ask kids to talk about when they were last hungry and what that felt like. Can they describe some physical sensations? Emotional or mental ones?

The next level of insight is helping children acknowledge that they all need help to make sure they get three meals a day. You could ask students to raise their hands if they shop for all their own food, cook all their own meals, and take care of cleaning up after every meal.

Yet another level, which follows logically from the topic of shopping for food, is an understanding that groceries are expensive, and families don't always have enough money in their food budgets to buy everything that they want or need. Sometimes money is tight. And while this is not something that is inherently shameful or a sign of failure, it can nevertheless cause deep feelings of shame or embarrassment.

One of the many unexpected side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to make food insecurity a more approachable topic. Virtually every child will know of a family member or friend of the family who lost their job or suffered financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. The magnitude of this situation means that many families who may not have needed food assistance in the past do need help now.

The “other” has become “us” for huge numbers of families and children, and this moment in history may help more people find empathy and understanding around this issue. (The painful flipside is that there will be many more Lulus out there, fighting their own Hunger Monsters.)

All of these avenues can serve as ways for you to guide and encourage your class toward understanding that having enough healthy food is something that we can all help each other with, and that *Lulu and the Hunger Monster* will help us figure out how to do so.

As a teacher sharing this book, you may have students in your class who you think are vulnerable to food insecurity, or who you know have experienced it. How can you educate the whole class about the issue while sending specific children the message that it is okay to come to you for help—without singling anyone out?

The hope is that by raising awareness among everyone in the class, those who need help will be empowered to follow in Lulu's footsteps and ask you or someone else for assistance. Even if they are not ready to take this step, sensitive discussions about hunger might still help these students be more open to the idea of assistance, should the time come when they are asked if their family would be interested in getting extra food.

Before sharing this book with your students, you also need to ensure that you know what resources are available to families in your area, and that you have a way of communicating that information. Local social



service agencies or the local 211 (a phone number where residents can get information about community and social services) might have a listing of food pantries and other resources nearby, including the days and hours of operation. This listing might also need to be found in or translated into school families' home languages.

If you do approach a student about whom you have concerns, you might begin by privately asking questions such as: *“Kids growing up need a lot of food. Do you feel hungry a lot of the time?”* or *“Are there times when you want to eat more food than you have?”*

If the answer is yes, the first step is to validate and honor the child's bravery in talking about the problem. Typically, the child will be concerned about the food insecurity challenge for the whole family, not just for themselves. You can reassure them that by trying to help solve this problem, you are helping everyone in their family. Since children have only limited influence over the nutrition environment in their home, the next step would be to look for a chance to speak to a parent or caregiver and offer them a written flyer, while giving the impression that you are handing out these flyers to everyone or that this is simply an opportunity to get free food. (Everyone knows it's okay to like free stuff!) You could also consider sending the flyers home with students as part of a homework or general school information packet. (Your school may have rules about what can be sent home to parents, so you might have to get approval for this.)

Navigating this area can be challenging. As an educator, you have a significant emotional investment in your students, and it can be upsetting to believe that a child may not be getting the nutrition they need. Many teachers try to solve the problem of hungry kids in the classroom on their own, taking it upon themselves to buy snacks as well as school supplies. This is an understandable and empathetic response that can indeed make a difference on an individual and day-to-day basis. For more sustainable and long-lasting change, however, the goal has to be to steer children and families to the support they need. At the same time, it's essential for teachers to remember that many elements of the situation are out of their control. As an educator, your mission is to fill minds, not bellies. So remember to be kind to yourself, and don't be too hard on yourself about what you may be unable to change or fix. Addressing hunger in the classroom and beyond is far from a one-person job.



Discussing and Exploring *Lulu and the Hunger Monster* with Students

MEET THE CHARACTERS

As a first step in diving deeper into the book, simply talk with your group about the characters and their roles in the story. You might invite kids to share what they noticed about each character, what they liked about them (or, in the case of the Hunger Monster, what they didn't like), and what they'd want to ask them if they could meet. To get you started, here are snapshots of some key figures in the book.



Lulu is a girl who likes to laugh! She's always sharing jokes, especially with Ava, her best friend at school. But when the Hunger Monster comes back into her life, it's much harder for Lulu to be her usual jokey self. And it's tough for her to find the energy to play with her friends or concentrate in class. The monster even encourages her to steal food from a classmate when she is hungry, but Lulu bravely refuses temptation. Lulu is determined not only to beat the Hunger Monster, but to protect her mother from it too. At the end of the story, her perspective widens, and she wants to help other families in her community who face hunger.



Lulu's mom works hard to make sure that Lulu is loved and cared for. She doesn't make a lot of money, so if something goes wrong—like when their van breaks down—it becomes hard to make ends meet. Like many food insecure parents, she forgoes meals herself so that her daughter can eat.



Ava is Lulu's best friend. They have best friend heart necklaces. Once Ava understands what is going on, she takes action, trying to help Lulu in careful ways that will not cause Lulu embarrassment or shame about her food insecurity. We all need a friend like Ava.



Veronica and **Manuel** are other friends in Lulu's class. They help in a practical way by sharing food they bring to school for snack time. They realize that just as important as the food they share with Lulu is the way they share it. They don't make a big deal about it or expect any big thanks.



Mr. Abidi is Lulu's teacher. Mr. Abidi does not realize at first that Lulu has a problem with food insecurity. Many teachers bring their own extra snacks for hungry students who forget to bring a snack to school, but many don't, or don't realize that it might be a problem that goes on for more than one day. Mr. Abidi uses the school garden to get students interested in the food system. He empowers them to be healthier by involving them as active participants in that system. Mr. Abidi also volunteers at the local food pantry and so offers a solution to the problem that Lulu had the courage to speak up about.



And then there's the **Hunger Monster**. This sneaky creature can be chased away or made smaller, but it is very hard to keep away completely. We all get hungry several times a day, and Monster waits patiently for when hunger turns into food insecurity. This monster is devious and mean because it tricks people into feeling embarrassed so they'll keep quiet. It knows that kids are worried others will talk about them or make fun of them if they know they need access to free food. This is what gives Monster the power to carry on undetected.



Genus: *Sneakysecret*
Species: *Tummyrumblus*

Characteristics

- Two horns
- Tornado tummy that sucks in all the food around, so people don't have enough
- Varies in size depending on how hungry you are
- Knows how to lie, brag, and play tricks

Warning

Do not approach. If threatened by this monster, seek help at once.

Integrating This Book into Your Classroom Routine

Hunger is a unique issue. It is initially invisible, making it difficult to identify and confront. At the same time, once spotted, it's an issue that almost all of us—experts and nonexperts alike—can take steps toward solving. This means that children can be valuable participants in the work of observing hunger and food insecurity and of responding to these problems in productive ways.

STAGE 1: UNDERSTANDING

Before students can begin taking steps to combat hunger, they need to have a picture of the problem. Discussing the following facts and statistics will help them get a handle on the scope of the issue and begin to think about who it affects—including people they know.

What is Childhood Hunger? What is Childhood Food Insecurity?

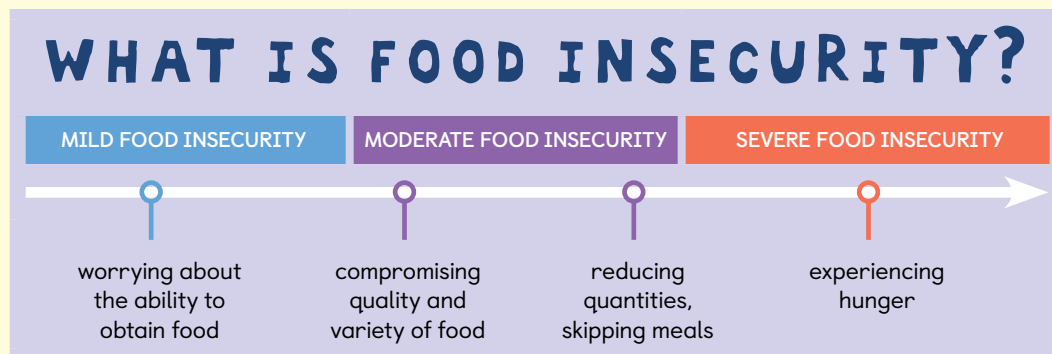
Confusion often arises around how these two terms are used. Many of us have grown up seeing images of starving children—often in other countries—and these images may have informed our understanding and awareness of what hunger is. Starvation and famine are, of course, global problems that demand attention and action. This does not mean that hunger does not exist in nations that do not face these issues on a large scale, however. More common and often much more invisible is food insecurity, where because of fluctuations in family income and expenses, children may undergo short or extended periods of eating low-quality food to fill their bellies, or may have to face periods of time when there is little to eat at all.

“Food insecure” is not a label to put on people as a way of judging, stigmatizing, or isolating them. Millions of Americans live in poverty. These families face almost constant food insecurity, with daily trade-offs between food and other necessities, like purchasing medication or paying bills. Many millions more move in and out of food insecurity on a weekly basis. These are families like Lulu’s—and whether you realize it or not, these are families you know.

This means there are families whom others might assume are doing fine—and who *usually* are—who will sometimes face times when they have no cushion to fall back on, and so become temporarily food insecure.

With your group, you might discuss why everyone deserves to have enough food to be healthy, and how, if people don’t have much money for food, they might buy unhealthy (or less healthy) food if it’s less expensive. This in turn leads to childhood food-related illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes skyrocketing, due to poor-quality diet directly related to food insecurity. (You could also ask kids what types of food *they* think are healthy and talk about how we can look at the nutritional information on packaged food to learn information like how much fat and salt a food contains.)

For more information on hunger and food insecurity, here are some facts, figures, and explanations from Feeding America (feedingamerica.org).



Adapted from and used with permission of Feeding America (feedingamerica.org).

Hunger deprives kids of more than just food. It’s a simple fact: A child’s chance for a bright future tomorrow starts with getting enough food to eat today. But in the United States, one in seven children may not know where they’ll get their next meal. This means that approximately eleven million kids in the US are facing hunger, and getting the energy they need to learn and grow can be a daily challenge.

What happens when a child faces hunger? Kids who don’t get enough to eat—especially during their first three years—begin life at a disadvantage. When they’re hungry, children are more likely to be hospitalized and they face higher risks of health conditions like anemia and asthma. As they grow up, kids struggling to get enough to eat are more likely to have problems in school and other social situations. They are more likely to:

- repeat a grade in elementary school
- experience developmental impairments in areas like language and motor skills
- have more social and behavioral problems

Helping Your Class Understand Food Insecurity

Many adults struggle to differentiate hunger from food insecurity, so children may grapple with this challenge as well. As you work to help your students understand this distinction, you might use a car analogy. You can describe hunger as the message your body sends you to say that it needs fuel to keep the engine running—sort of like the fuel gauge in a car that moves gradually from full to empty. Food insecurity is when the fuel gauge is low and you're unable to find a gas station when you need it. When that happens, you run out of energy and get stuck.

STAGE 2: EMPATHY

Everyone has to eat, and everyone feels hungry, so everyone can feel some level of personal empathy with the problem of food insecurity. The difference is that, even when they feel hungry, a food secure kid knows they have a nutritious meal in their future. You can use the following questions and topics as a way to deepen the discussion of hunger with your group and help students better understand what it would be like to be Lulu or a kid like her.

Why IS There a Stigma to Not Having Enough to Eat?

The pressure to conform—to not stand out from our peers—begins in kindergarten and continues for the rest of our lives. One of these areas of conformity revolves around not having too little food—or too much. There are also many specific pressures related to body image and other issues, some of which can lead to eating disorders in the food secure as well as the food insecure.

With food insecurity, the issue is often perceived as one of personal responsibility. Some people might think that since parents are responsible for feeding their kids, they must be “bad” parents if they can't fulfill that responsibility.

Like Lulu when the Hunger Monster threatens that people will think her mom is a bad person, most children are protective of their parents and don't want them to receive such a label, especially when they know their parents *are* good caregivers who are doing the best they can in a difficult situation. This protectiveness can be another reason kids don't speak up about the challenges facing their families.

Talk with your group about these ideas and challenges. Can kids remember a situation where they felt shy or embarrassed about admitting that they had a problem or needed help? For example, maybe they learned to ride a bicycle later or more slowly than their friends, and didn't want to admit it. Kids experiencing food insecurity can have very similar feelings of embarrassment and unwillingness to ask for help.

STAGE 3: ACTION

Once students have an overview of the issues of food security and hunger, and have experienced some empathy toward those who deal with these realities, you can move your group toward taking action. There are many ways to approach this challenge, and this section offers up a starting point. Depending on the interests, needs, and strengths of the students you work with, your group will undoubtedly come up with ideas of your own.



How Can We Help Our Friends and Neighbors?

Lulu does not accept the role the Hunger Monster claims in her life. She fights back against it, not only for herself, but for her mother. Lulu also doesn't—can't—do it all by herself. Classmates and adults step in to help her.

If you have successfully helped students understand and be empathetic toward the problem and if you have worked to assist students who may be food insecure themselves, the next stage is to turn loose all that energy and those good intentions to help families like Lulu's and make a difference in your local community.

So what types of things can your class do to help those who are facing down the Hunger Monster? The activities in this guide can provide a springboard for other ideas and other ways of taking action. Don't be afraid to think big, but also remember that even small actions are powerful. You and your students may be surprised at the reach and the impact you can have.

Discussion Questions

Part of the book is the story of how Lulu builds up the courage to ask for help. Here are some discussion questions that can help your students understand Lulu's decision:

- How can we encourage people to speak up if they or a friend need help?
- If you needed help, who could you turn to?
- Why would it be important to do something now—even if it's just a small step—rather than waiting and hoping for the situation to get better by itself?
- Who else is Lulu helping with her decision, besides herself?
- None of us can wave a magic wand and fix the problem of hunger for good, so we have to be aware that even if we send the Hunger Monster on its way, it could still come back. How can we deal with that reality and still keep working to help others without getting discouraged?

Activities

STANDING IN SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

Invite students to write a story about a child who is facing their own Hunger Monster. The story might include how that child stands up to their Hunger Monster, and also how other people help. If you like, you could put kids into small groups to collaborate as they write and illustrate their stories.

REACHING OUT

With your group, talk about what it feels like to help people, as well as why people might feel shy about saying they need help. While your discussion may well focus on helping people specifically with the problem of hunger, the concept of reaching out to help others is important no matter what the need is, so feel free to let the group explore a range of topics. You also may want to guide your group to understand that helping others can mean a lot of different things, and it doesn't look the same to everyone.

The following questions can serve as jumping-off points for this conversation.

- Can you think of a time when you helped someone who was having a problem? It might have been something big or something small. What was the situation?
- How did you feel about yourself when you did it?
- What do you think would happen if everyone did something to help hungry people?
- How can you make sure that the person you are helping is involved in fixing the situation? (This is an important component of offering help, as it empowers the person who is facing the challenge. You may or may not talk about this directly with students, but it can be a valuable concept to explore if the conversation moves in that direction.)
- What do you think you would do if someone didn't want your help?
- The first time or the first way you address any challenge—including helping someone face an issue like hunger—might not be the right approach, or it might not work. How can you figure out if your help is working, and come up with new ideas if it isn't?



TIME TO ACT

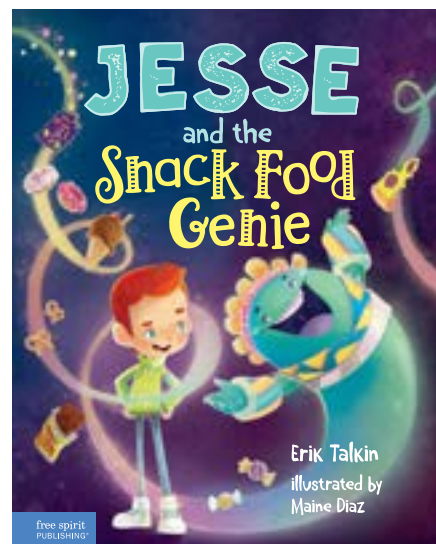
The following activities are just starting points, and your students are likely to have creative ideas of their own. And the more involved they are in generating and planning these ideas, the more invested and engaged they'll be in following through. After brainstorming and choosing one or more ideas to pursue, make a class plan for what you are going to do and when. If you like, share your action online with the hashtag #BeatTheHungerMonster.

- Decorate grocery bags to get food donations. These bags could be handed out at a school event, distributed in the community, and sent home to families. See how many food donations your class can gather. If you like, you can tie this in with Hunger Action Month in September. However, families need food all year round. You could do this multiple times throughout the school year.
- Find out if your area has local harvesting programs where your group can volunteer to pick produce that is then donated to food banks. It's a fun team activity and gets healthy food into the hands of people who need it.
- Encourage your school to start a school garden like Mr. Abidi does in the story. Some of this food can be earmarked for donation to the local food pantry.
- Many food pantries now need help more urgently than ever. When students volunteer for these organizations with parents and caregivers, it helps broaden their awareness beyond the classroom, and also offers a chance for valuable family engagement.
- Set up a walkathon, fun run, or other outdoor activity to raise money for your local food bank.

JESSE AND THE SNACK FOOD GENIE

A Note About the Story

Jesse's story is one I wanted to write for a long time. While Lulu's story highlights a struggle faced by many but not all kids, Jesse's story is everyone's story; we all know it can be very easy to eat a lot of snack foods and neglect a balanced diet. The blanket advertising of snack foods online and on television is constantly whispering at you, just like the genie does with Jesse. How do we all deal with this incessant whispering? I knew this story couldn't be preachy, nor could it make the mistake of seeming to label foods as "good" or "bad." Rather, it had to deal with the real challenges kids face—which are inequitable and deeply intertwined with social, cultural, economic, and physical factors. In my experience, it doesn't help anyone much to tell someone never to eat another candy bar or bag of chips. But we *can* suggest that they balance these foods with a broader range of healthy, nourishing foods.



Discussing and Exploring *Jesse and the Snack Food Genie* with Students

MEET THE CHARACTERS



Jesse is someone with so much natural energy, he just has to dance! He also loves to fill up on snack foods—sweet, salty, or even sweet *and* salty together. That doesn't always go too well for him, though. Snack foods may give Jesse a quick rush of energy, but not the type of sustained energy that he needs to dance or even to get through a busy day. When he meets Genie, things go seriously out of balance, affecting his chance of getting a dance class scholarship. Eventually, Jesse gets wise to how the Genie is slowing him down and making it harder for his family to eat healthy meals together.



The Snack Food Genie is a sweet guy. (He's also salty and highly processed.) He's fun to hang around with and bills himself as the life of any party—but he's still a genie. We have human bodies and there's only so much snack food that it's healthy and sustainable for us to consume.



Gabriel is Jesse's good friend and the guy who inspires Jesse to try out for the dance scholarship. Gabriel enjoys snack foods too. He has also learned to listen to his body, so he knows how to keep his energy levels up, and what food wakes him up and what puts him to sleep.



Mom and Dad have both had their brushes in the past with the Snack Food Genie, as we all have. They work hard and they care about each other and about Jesse. At the same time, they recognize how tempting it is to eat quick and convenient food snacks rather than always preparing healthy meals. This is especially true when they're tired from work.



Maya is one of Jesse's friends from school. She brings a big bag of treats to the sleepover, disrupting Jesse's plan to stick to the healthy snacks his mom has provided. She's Genie's apprentice, even if she didn't realize or mean to be.

Integrating This Book into Your Classroom Routine

Whilst not ostensibly as sensitive a subject as food insecurity and how it might affect children in the classroom, the issue of healthy eating is also one that is complex and needs to be approached with care. The days of pointing to a food pyramid as good and proselytizing about the evils of “junk” food are over. Leaning into judgmental or negative discussions of these issues can, in turn, have negative effects on children's health outcomes. Instead, a more productive approach is to emphasize the idea that because many snack foods are light on nutrition, it's helpful to view them as “sometimes” foods. No food is inherently bad. Rather, these “sometimes” foods are ones that kids (and adults!) can enjoy from time to time as part of a balanced mix of foods that help them feel good.

Issues such as body image, culturally favored or restricted foods, family traditions, and inequity around access to food could all come into play during class discussion of this book. This can sometimes be challenging, but it's nevertheless important to have honest and respectful conversations around this topic and these ideas. Teachers and students all want to be healthy and what we eat plays a role in determining how healthy we are as we grow older.

After reading the book, you can help students tease out some key concepts and questions, such as these:

- Genie is fun, but would you want him around all the time?
- Jesse's friend Gabriel has a balanced approach to “sometimes” foods and the other foods he needs to be strong and energetic as a dancer. How can we each learn to find this balance and practice listening to our body cues?
- This issue is not only about one person, nor is it one that children need to—or can—solve alone. Most of us live in family situations where after a long, hard day, it's a challenge to cook or think about healthier options. How could we start small and make incremental changes that help everyone feel good?
- Jesse starts to ask hard questions of Genie—why is snack food so cheap and plentiful, whereas healthier food can be more expensive and harder to find? As children also consider these questions, the answers will lead naturally into the subject matter of the third book, *Frankie versus the Food Phantom*, and its exploration of the food system.

PRINCIPLES FOR FOSTERING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

At the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County, we have developed some key precepts for building food literacy and fostering positive experiences with food. You can discuss and explore the following ideas with your students to help them become “food bosses” who have a healthy relationship with food.

Celebrate and enjoy cultural foods.

- We appreciate all cultural foods and their nutritional, social, and community value.

Inspire and promote the exploration of new foods.

- Exploring new foods is fun! It can awaken the senses and connect us with neighbors, classmates, friends, and family in new ways.
- Treat all food choices with respect—in other words, “don’t yuck someone else’s yum.” Encourage healthy choices while remembering that every person has the right to make their own decisions.

Respect body diversity.

- Every individual is unique, with their own history, health needs, and more. Well-being is maintained according to choices, habits, and relationships with food, and it is *not* based on physical attributes.
- Focus on how nutrition affects the body and how it makes us feel, rather than on how it might change our physical appearance or weight.

Listen for, recognize, and acknowledge feelings of hunger and fullness.

- It’s important to feed our bodies enough energy with a variety of foods. We do this in part by listening to and trusting cues of hunger and fullness.

Understand that all foods fit.

- It’s okay for people to eat ALL foods without shame or guilt. Food provides nutrition, of course—and it can also provide significance and satisfaction. It’s important to seek balance and variety in our food choices.
- Try not to restrict foods or label them as good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, junk/clean, etc. Instead, try thinking about foods as nutritious, satisfying, tasty, energizing; as “always,” “sometimes,” and “not too often” foods; and so on.
- Focus on the addition of foods rather than restriction.
- Learning about nutrition empowers us, our families, and our communities to make decisions that best suit our lives.
 - ◇ Note: When we give ourselves full permission to eat foods we enjoy, we are less likely to eat excessively, less likely to engage in disordered eating, and experience less guilt when eating.
 - ◇ Keep the focus on satisfaction and joy in eating!



Teach with gentle nutrition information.

- Focus on the positive impacts that nutrition and fuel have on our bodies.
- One small change in behavior can have meaningful impacts on health, and it's powerful to celebrate each step we make on our journey to lifelong wellness.

Make space for diverse circumstances.

- Individual people and families have varying access to resources, including money, free time, transportation, and more. This may mean some choose processed foods over homemade foods, conventional produce versus organic produce, and so on. When discussing all of these ideas it's important to avoid judgment and to resist implying that any one approach is right or wrong. Instead, we can focus on empowering students and communities to make nutritious choices that are available and realistic to them.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think the Snack Food Genie's plan or goal with Jesse is? Why does Genie show up when he does?
- If Genie came to your house, how would you deal with him?
- How do you go about trying to keep a balance among many kinds of foods?
- What difference have you noticed in your body after eating a snack food? Ten minutes afterward? One hour later? How can you use these body cues?
- What ways does your family have of sharing a meal or preparing a meal together, like Jesse does with his mom and dad?
- What recipes do you like to cook as a family? What do you enjoy about preparing food together?
- What are your favorite kinds of foods? *Note:* As students reply, you might list their answers on the board and discuss each food's characteristics, without judging choices or labeling them as bad or unhealthy. For instance, is each food a meal? A snack? This is also an opportunity to think about whether each food is more of an "always" food or a "sometimes" food. Another idea to explore is where the food comes from. Did it grow in the earth? Did it grow on a tree? Did it walk on the land or swim in the sea?
- What are some simple ways each of us can give our bodies healthy fuel? *Note:* As students answer this question, you could guide them to consider testing out some tools we use at the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County. For instance, "Rethink your drink: What sweet drinks could you replace with water today?" or "Eat the rainbow: What colorful fruits and veggies could you try adding to your plate?" or "Do a seed swap: Meat isn't the only way to get protein—beans, peas, nuts, and seeds are great sources too."



Activities

COOKING IN THE CLASSROOM

It's possible to do some cooking in the classroom, using simple recipes that don't require heat. Check with your school about what's permitted and in line with health codes; you might even be able to spend some time in the school kitchen or meal prep area. This can also be a great time to begin to teach kids about food-borne illness and the importance of keeping hands and surfaces sanitized. A key to making this activity a success is to find things for everyone to do, so you might try breaking into small groups and giving each a chance to try a different recipe (or multiple recipes). Here are three simple recipes to try.

Hummus

Serves 4

Preparation time: 10–15 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- 1 medium garlic clove
- 2 15-ounce cans of chickpeas
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup liquid from the chickpea cans
- 1 large lemon, juiced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cumin
- 1 tablespoon natural peanut butter (optional)
- veggies and/or pita bread for dipping

DIRECTIONS

1. Peel the garlic clove. Drain the chickpeas, reserving $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of their liquid.
2. Add the garlic, chickpeas, chickpea liquid, lemon juice, olive oil, salt, cumin, and peanut butter (if using) to a blender or food processor. Blend until creamy, about 5 minutes.
3. Serve with veggies like celery, carrots, and bell peppers and/or with pita bread. Hummus will keep for about a week in the refrigerator.



Mexican Corn Salad

Serves 2

Preparation time: 20–25 minutes

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons cooking oil
2 cups corn, canned or frozen
salt to taste
1 tablespoon Greek yogurt or mayonnaise
2 tablespoons crumbled cotija cheese
2 tablespoons diced red onion
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup finely chopped cilantro leaves
half a lime, juiced
chili powder to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat.
2. Add the corn to the pan and salt to taste. Allow corn to char slightly on one side, about 2 minutes. Then toss and repeat until corn is slightly charred all over, about 10 minutes.
3. Add corn to a large bowl with the yogurt or mayo, cotija cheese, red onion, cilantro, lime juice, and chili powder. Mix until everything is fully combined.
4. Serve alone; enjoy as a snack with corn chips; or use this salad to add flavor to any meal.

Watermelon Juice

Serves 4

Preparation time: 5–10 minutes

INGREDIENTS

4 cups cubed watermelon, without seeds
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cold water
1 large lime, juiced
sugar to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Put half of the cubed watermelon in a blender. Blend until liquid.
2. Pour the mixture through a strainer and into a large pitcher. Repeat with the remaining watermelon.
3. Add the cold water and the lime juice. Taste and stir in sugar if desired.
4. Serve over ice.



FOOD COLLAGE

This art-focused activity is a great way to get kids thinking creatively and visually. Invite students to make unique collages using images of food. Depending on your group's age level, skills, and resources, you could have students create digital collages using pictures they find online, or physical ones using images cut out of magazines.

If you're making physical collages, contact businesses in your area to see if you can have magazines they would otherwise recycle. You can also invite students to bring in magazines from home if their parents agree. Cooking and food magazines are obviously great for this activity, but any type of publication is likely to have some images of food. You can also supplement magazines if needed by printing out online images.

Students' collages can take a variety of forms. For instance, kids might create an image of a meal that includes lots of different foods they like. You could suggest that they depict foods that are among their favorites already, while also trying to pick some new foods they'd like to try. Another variation is to create collages showing one favorite dish using images of other kinds of food, such as a depiction of a salad, pie, bowl of cereal, or pizza that is actually made up of images of many different foods. Or students could choose a recipe and illustrate it via collage.

Again, depending on your group's age and preferences, you could brainstorm together about other ideas before they get started collaging. After they've finished their collages, invite kids to share and talk about their creations.

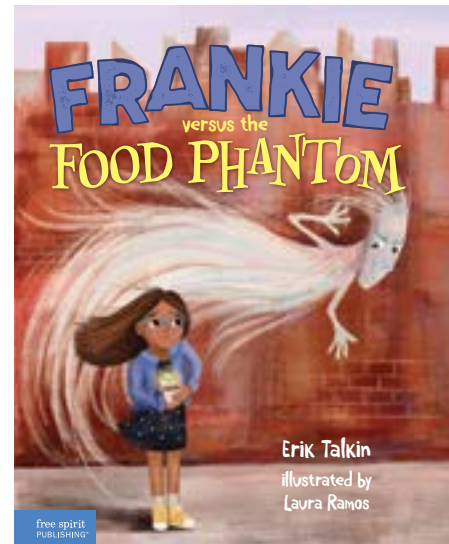
Some of the content in this section is adapted from the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County's FOODBOS curriculum and used with permission; foodbanksbc.org. The FOODBOS curriculum is principally authored by Lacey M. Baldiviez, Ph.D., with contributions from Alysha Izoco, RD, and Kayla Mallari, RDN. "Principles for Fostering a Positive Relationship with Food" is adapted from the work of Kayla Mallari, RDN, and Lacey M. Baldiviez, Ph.D.



FRANKIE VERSUS THE FOOD PHANTOM

A Note About the Story

Out of all the intriguing figures in the Food Justice Books for Kids series, the Food Phantom is the most complex. Like the Hunger Monster and the Snack Food Genie, Phantom is active in trying to dissuade the protagonist of his book from doing something beneficial, but his reasons are very human. The food system has evolved over hundreds of years, devised to make selling food to people more efficient, but the Food Phantom is too trapped in the past and his own woes to let the system evolve and change, even if it would benefit new generations. To Frankie, Phantom is a metaphor for all the forces that stop both kids and adults from taking an active interest in the food system. She has to toughen herself up and learn to cooperate with and rely on her friends if she is going to be able to reach her ultimate goal of making a garden out of an empty lot. It's a great way to conclude the series, because it allows kids to create the most opportunities for themselves and their communities.



Discussing and Exploring *Frankie versus The Food Phantom* with Students

MEET THE CHARACTERS



Frankie lives with her grandfather in a part of her city where it's not always easy to find fresh produce and where fast food restaurants grow like weeds. When a school project leads her to find an abandoned lot that really is covered with weeds, she has the idea to plant a community garden. As Frankie finds out more about the local food system, she has to take on the Food Phantom, who is determined to stop her.



The Food Phantom is the ghost of a man who once farmed the land of the abandoned lot where Frankie wants to grow the community garden. In his view, this is his land, so he wants to stop Frankie. In the end, Phantom comes to realize that what happened in the past is done and that Frankie and her garden represent an exciting new opportunity for the future.



Grandpa remembers the old days when he would get fruits and vegetables from a community garden that he helped tend. Now he has to make do with window boxes outside his apartment window—that is, until the Food Phantom shows up and wrecks that too. Frankie promises Grandpa that she'll get make a new garden for him. But is it a promise she can keep?



Sacha and Izaak are Frankie’s classmates. She doesn’t know them too well until they are grouped together to do a project on the local food system. Sacha comes from a family with lots of access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Izaak’s family sometimes has to face food insecurity.



Mr. Zambrano runs Un Solo Sol Bodega, the local corner store near Frankie and Grandpa’s home. He would like to stock more fresh fruits and vegetables, but he doesn’t really have the space or the refrigeration to be able to do so.



Ms. Alvarez is Frankie’s teacher. She’s excited to get her class thinking about the local food system, and has them do fun projects like planting seed balls. She is also inspired to help Frankie, Sacha, and Izaak with their G.R.O.W. (Gardens Rock Our World) project and see it become a reality.

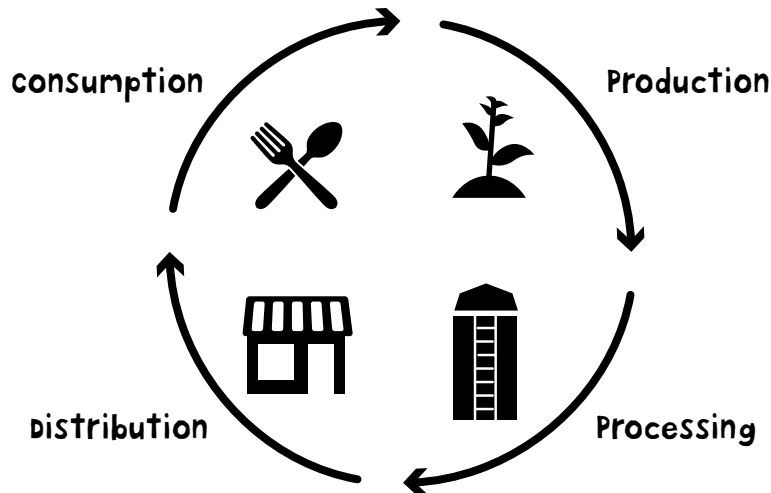
Integrating This Book into Your Classroom Routine

All kids are interested in food! But many don’t have a clear understanding about where their food comes from. What are the steps required to get that puffed wheat into that box? Did this apple come from this town? This state? This country? After reading the book, you can help students dig into these ideas and tease out key themes of the story, including these:

- Frankie lives in an area that could be considered a food desert, with limited access to affordable nutritious foods. Her Grandpa talks about how far he has to go to get fresh produce at a reasonable price. *Note:* The term *food desert* has begun to fall out of favor as we better understand and acknowledge how race, socioeconomic status, and other cultural and societal factors affect food access. The term *food apartheid* is sometimes used instead, as it highlights these issues.
- It looks as though the place where Frankie lives might be a food swamp as well. This term describes an area that has a glut of fast food restaurants, which “swamp” out healthier alternatives.
- Grandpa grows some of his own food, but doesn’t have the space to grow as much as he’d like, or enough to provide him and Frankie with fresh produce.
- We are all part of the food system, and we can change our role in it from being passive to active. Rather than simply accepting what the imperfect and impersonal system decides we should like and eat, we can equip ourselves with more information and find new ways to connect with the food system that are beneficial to us, our communities, and our health.
- A community garden can grow more than food. It can grow community itself by bringing people together to work toward a common purpose. This, along with fresh food, is valuable for the health of a neighborhood, town, or city and the people who live there.
- If students feel strongly about something, they can take a bold step and make change, like Frankie and her friends do. Even small changes can be powerful.
- When considering problems in the food system, students can think about real-world solutions such as urban gardening, buying local food at farmers markets, composting, recycling, and tree planting.

EXPLORING THE FOOD SYSTEM

In order to make the discussion more concrete for students, it is worth spending some time talking about the food system and understanding it better. This is the journey that food takes to get from where it came from—whether the wild, a farm, a factory, or elsewhere—to arrive on a plate in front of you. Frankie is right that it’s complicated, so it can help to break it down into four basic parts, as shown in this graphic:



Let’s look at those four parts in a little more detail.

1. Production

At the very beginning of food’s journey, we might find crops growing in a field or animals being raised for food, fished for in the seas, or hunted in the wild. Crops can be grains like wheat, soybeans, or corn. Vegetables like carrots or cabbages and fruits like strawberries or apples can be grown in anywhere from someone’s backyard to a hundred-thousand-acre farm. Chickens can be reared for their eggs or meat, cows for their milk or meat. Whatever the crop or the livestock, its care takes a lot of work from farmworkers. It may also take a toll on the environment. And in the case of livestock, humane treatment of animals must be considered as well.

2. Processing

Every food needs some kind of processing, storage, and packaging. It goes through a process to change it in some way into something new. This might be something as simple as rinsing off the dirt on a freshly pulled radish from a community garden, or as involved as the many steps needed to get from harvesting wheat to turning it into the dry cereal tinkling down into your bowl.

3. Distribution

At this stage of the journey, food is moved from farms and manufacturing plants and taken to where people live. That might mean transporting it to a different town, state, or country. Some food will go to a *wholesaler*, whose job it is to store lots of food, which is then sent out to individual stores. Some food may be distributed through food banks and pantries to those who need extra food help.

4. Consumption

This is the fun part! Here the food is prepared to be eaten—whether at a restaurant, in your kitchen, or elsewhere—and then people sit down at the table to enjoy it. This is a chance for us to celebrate family and cultural traditions and to make sure we have enough healthy food for everyone.

DOES THE FOOD SYSTEM ALWAYS RUN SMOOTHLY?

As we can see from Frankie’s story, and from the existence of areas where people don’t have enough access to healthy and affordable food, the food system isn’t perfect. Inequity remains. Impacts on our climate are a cause for concern. Safe working conditions and fair pay for everyone haven’t yet been achieved. There’s plenty of room for improvement.

At the same time, there are lots of things the food system does well. It has developed over thousands of years and has become really good at getting large amounts of food around the globe and into the hands of families, often at a reasonable price. People can also benefit from a much wider variety of types of food than in the past. In addition, the food system includes many farmers, restauraners, businesspeople, and others who are passionate about healthy food and ethical practices, and who have created many wonderful and delicious food options. Farmers markets and CSA (community supported agriculture) organizations also offer the opportunity to access locally grown food that is not only full of flavor and nutrients but also helps support the local economy. That’s a big win-win!

Discussion Questions

- What things do Frankie and her friends notice about their local food system?
- Take a look at the illustration of Frankie and her grandpa walking down the busy street. What aspects of the food system can you spot?
- What are the hurdles that Frankie has to overcome to succeed at her goal of creating a garden for the whole community? Who are the people who can help her?
- Think about your community. Where does the food come from? Does a lot of it come on trucks from distribution centers? What food is grown locally? Are there farmers markets in your area? A community garden? Note: The answers to these questions could be charted out on the board to begin to create a map of the local food system.
- Do any students in your class grow food at home?
- What help is there for people in your community who don’t have enough to eat?
- What are your ideas for improving your local food system? To get started thinking about this, you could try answering questions like the following: What elements of your local food system seem unhelpful or inequitable? What would you like to see that does not exist in the local system? What types of food would you like to eat that are not easily available or affordable?

Activities

MAKE SEED BALLS

Seed balls (sometimes also called seed bombs) are clumps of clay, soil, and seeds pressed together. They are designed to be tossed into neglected or vacant land to allow either edible or decorative plants to grow. Here's Frankie's secret seed ball recipe—try it with your class!

SUPPLIES

- 4 parts potter's clay (available at art supply stores)
- 1 part organic compost (see note)
- 1 part water, plus more as needed
- 1 part seeds of your choice (native varieties are best)

DIRECTIONS

1. In a large bowl or other container, hand mix clay, compost, and water until the mixture is the consistency of modeling clay.
2. Add the seeds and mix them all well.
3. Roll the mixture into 1-inch balls, adding a little more water if the seed balls aren't holding together easily.
4. Place on a cookie tray and allow to dry for 24 to 48 hours.
5. Toss and wait! **Note: Remember to make sure you and your students have permission to plant the seed balls if they are in a public place.**

Note: If you don't have access to compost, you can mix equal parts potting soil with potter's clay and then begin adding water to reach a sticky but not too soggy consistency. Then add seeds and form the mixture into pea-sized balls before moving on to step 4 above.



START A CONTAINER GARDEN

Got a hole in your bucket? Turn it into a planter! You can encourage kids to start a garden at home or elsewhere in the community by first starting one at school. It only takes a few supplies and a little time.

SUPPLIES

- 3-gallon or 5-gallon buckets that are food-grade safe
- potting soil
- herb or vegetable seeds
- electric drill

DIRECTIONS

1. Find your buckets. You can buy these at hardware stores, or see if local restaurants and grocery stores have extra buckets to donate for your project.
2. Pick out your plants. If you're using a 3-gallon bucket, choose smaller plants such as herbs. In a 5-gallon container you can grow larger plants like cherry tomatoes or cucumbers. Research each plant's needs for space, water, and light to determine if and how to group plants in your buckets.
3. Invite students to decorate the outside of the buckets if they'd like.
4. Drill five or six holes in the bottom of each bucket. They should be $\frac{1}{4}$ " to $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter.
5. You're ready to put the pieces together! Dampen the soil before putting it in the bucket by slowly adding water. Then place the soil in the bucket and begin planting. To know how much soil to use and how deep to place the seeds, follow the directions on the seed packet or look up details online.
6. Place your containers in spots where they'll each get the light they need. If you're keeping your containers inside, place something underneath to catch water. Once they're placed, give each one an initial big drink of water, watering them until some starts to drain out of the bottom. As your plants grow, continue to check on the soil periodically and water as needed.
7. Enjoy the fruits (or herbs) of your labors!



DIG INTO COMPOSTING

Composting is a fun activity to help kids understand the cyclical and interconnected nature of the food system and see how things that might be thrown away can instead be used to nourish new plants and create more fresh food. See if you could experiment with composting food waste from the school cafeteria. Learn more about a safe composting project to do with students at the KidsGardening website (kidsgardening.org/resources/gardening-basics-composting).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Maybe you or your students will have noticed that in *Frankie versus the Food Phantom*, the Hunger Monster and the Snack Food Genie are both mentioned. That’s because—like it or not—they both play significant roles in the food system. In fact, I think of them as cousins. And this is yet another reason I knew readers needed the full story beyond Lulu’s experiences, and why it was so important to me to create the Food Justice Books for Kids series.

As you and your students explore the trio of books, you can begin to piece together how the Snack Food Genie and the Hunger Monster are connected to each other. The Hunger Monster shows up when people are food insecure, with minimal money available to spend on food. That’s when Genie steps in and plays his part, as these individuals and families are more likely to rely on high-fat, high-salt, and high-sugar snack foods as major portions of their diet. These foods are filling, cheap, and easily available—and they’re a lot better than not having any food at all. But overreliance on snack foods can, in turn, affect energy and general health. The effects of the Hunger Monster and the Snack Food Genie working together can also be seen in food swamps or food deserts where people do not have easy or affordable access to a wide range of healthy food options.

In Frankie’s story, she discovers that these figures—Hunger Monster, Snack Food Genie, and Phantom himself—seem nearly impossible to take on alone. But they become more manageable when a group of people act as a team and work toward improving their community. Empowered by that knowledge, Frankie and her friends are able to take a significant step to exert some control over their place in the local food system.

In your class, there are probably some Lulus, definitely plenty of Jesses, and hopefully a few Frankies. With these books, you can support each of them and work toward a better and healthier future for everyone.



OTHER RESOURCES

The following websites, books, and videos offer additional information for educators and other adults exploring the issue of hunger with children, along with ideas for tackling the problem.

LULU AND THE HUNGER MONSTER

“How You Can Help Save Local Kids from Going Hungry This Summer” by Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (*Time Magazine*, 2017)
time.com/4858555/child-food-insecurity-schools-summer
Pragmatic support and guidance for people wanting to support kids facing food insecurity outside of school.

Hunger into Health by Erik Talkin (Food Lit Press, 2018)
Written by the author of the Food Justice Books for Kids series, this nonfiction book looks at practical solutions for communities to end food insecurity.

A Place at the Table (Participant Media, 2012)
participant.com/film/place-table
This excellent documentary film looks at how food insecurity affects American families, and features a powerful interview with anti-hunger advocate Jeff Bridges.

“Shame, Stigma, Misinformation Compound Food Insecurity Problems” by Tamika Rey, Angel De Jesus, Hannah Lanier, and Blake Evans (*The Rampage*, 2019)
therampageonline.com/news/2019/05/01/shame-stigma-misinformation-compound-food-insecurity-problems
A detailed article that talks straight on food insecurity.

“Why Giving People More Food Doesn’t End Hunger (TEDxSantaBarbara, 2019)
ted.com/talks/erik_talkin_why_giving_people_more_food_doesn_t_end_hunger
This TED Talk by Erik Talkin takes a look at how we can build food security through more food literacy.

JESSE AND THE SNACK FOOD GENIE

“9 Fun Nutrition Games for Kids”
wakeforestpediatrics.com/9-fun-nutrition-games-for-kids
This list offers creative ways to dig into the topic of nutrition in an entertaining way.

“20 Nutrition Activities for Elementary Students”
teachingexpertise.com/classroom-ideas/nutrition-activities-for-elementary-students
This list offers lots of additional nutrition-based activity ideas for your classroom.

Daily Bread: What Kids Eat Around the World by Gregg Segal (powerHouse Books, 2019)
This highly visual book offers a great starting point for students to consider the food habits of kids all around the globe.

Food Anatomy Activities for Kids: Fun, Hands-On Learning by Amber K. Stott (Rockridge Press, 2021)
This resource offers engaging food-focused lessons for kids ages 8 to 12.

Food Literacy Center
foodliteracycenter.org
This site provides a wealth of information on all things nutrition for kids.

“Healthy Eating Curriculum May Contribute to Eating Disorders in Kids” by Mallery Tenore Tarpley (*Washington Post*, August 21, 2023)
washingtonpost.com/parenting/2023/08/21/curriculum-trigger-eating-disorder
This piece explores the complexity of discussing food with kids in safe and healthy ways.

USDA: Kids’ Corner
nutrition.gov/topics/nutrition-life-stage/children/kids-corner
This site brings together a variety of USDA activities and resources for kids.

FRANKIE VERSUS THE FOOD PHANTOM

Exploring Food Justice

exploringfoodjustice.weebly.com

Understanding the food system can lead to questions about issues of food justice. This site provides insights for third graders and beyond.

Food Justice Terminology

cityslickerfarms.org/food-justice-terminology

This page explores and explains many terms commonly used in the field of food justice.

Food Systems

climatekids.org/food

This page from Climate Kids offers activities exploring the connections between food systems and our global climate.

Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood by Tony Hillery (Simon & Schuster, 2020)

This picture book tells the true story of a lush garden in New York City that grew out of an abandoned lot and went on to feed a neighborhood.

KidsGardening

kidsgardening.org

This is a great website for educators and parents to help kids get their hands dirty!

“What Makes Up a Food System? Breaking It Down into 4 Parts” by Mia Burger

sustainablefoodcenter.org/latest/blog/what-makes-up-a-food-system-breaking-it-down-into-4-parts

This page from the Sustainable Food Center provides more information on the components of the food system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Erik Talkin, CEO of the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County, is a recognized innovator and leader in America's food bank network. Committed to helping people build long-term food security, Erik has helped create innovative, national-award-winning children's nutrition education programs such as Healthy School Pantry and Kid's Farmers Market. Erik is also a filmmaker who has served as a principal in two production companies, and a writer who has authored *Hunger into Health* as well as the Food Justice Books for Kids series.

Erik is also a writer and filmmaker and has served as a principal in two production companies. His short film *The Gallery*, starring Helena Bonham Carter, was selected for the London Film Festival. He has won an International Television Association Award for writing and directing educational drama and his theatrical work has been produced on the London Fringe. Erik lives in Santa Barbara, California. Find out more about the series at FoodJusticeBooksForKids.com, and visit Erik at his website, eriktalkin.com.

