



Identifying Children “At Risk” of Weekend Hunger

The Family Pack Program 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 child at risk of food insecurity.

Food Insecure: 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.

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

- Rushing food lines or showing up early for breakfast
- Extreme hunger on Monday mornings
- Eating all of the food served – not being picky about what is placed in front of them
- Lingered around for seconds or constantly ask for more

How to assess whether or not a child is “food insecure”:

I. Hunger vs. Food Insecurity

A child who complains about being hungry is not necessarily a child who automatically qualifies for the Family Pack Program. Generally speaking, growing children have a healthy appetite and will say they are hungry at periods throughout the day. However, in the case of a chronically hungry child, certain questions can be asked to assess need. In the morning a child may say he or she is 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 and if it was enough to fill them up.

By asking a few questions you should be able to assess whether or not this is just a case of normal hunger or whether this seems to be a frequent incident that results from food insecurity. Obviously a child who says there is never enough food in the house or that all they had for dinner was a small snack (i.e. potato chips) is a child who is considered food insecure. Even if a child is simply worried that there will not be enough food at home, this is a cause for concern. Food insecurity is the main reason for the Family Pack Program. Any child who exhibits this behavior should be considered a candidate for receiving a Family Pack.

- Assess hunger through further questioning
- Determine reason(s) for not eating

II. Physical Appearance:

Certain physical features are indicators of vitamin and/or food deficiencies. If the skin of a child appears to be puffy and swollen it can be due to a protein deficiency. A child who is very thin and whose bones are starting to protrude may have a lack of protein and calories. Another characteristic to watch for is redness around the lips and/or cracked lips. Finally, dry and itchy eyes can be a sign of a vitamin A deficiency. Please keep in mind that the weight of a child isn't always a sure indication of food insecurity, as some children are just naturally very thin. And on the other hand, some obesity is caused from poor nutrition in the diet of the child. Any of these physical signs merit concern and prompt further questions.

- Extreme thinness or puffy, swollen skin
- Chronically dry, cracked lips
- Chronically dry, itchy eyes

III. School Performance/Behavior: Sometimes the behavior of a child indicates problems at home, with food insecurity being one of them. By observing some of the following it may help in identifying chronic hunger:

- Excessive absences – due to illness or unexcused
- Hyperactive, aggressive, irritable, anxious, withdrawn, distressed, passive/aggressive – any display of these mentioned which leads to disciplinary action
- Repetition of a grade
- Difficulty in forming friendships, getting along with others
- Illness – sore throat, common cold, stomach ache, ear infection, fatigue
- Short attention span, inability to concentrate

IV. Home Environment: Sometimes children will be very open about what is going on at home. By listening to your students and by being in contact with parents, the needs of the family may be assessed, which in turn can help determine whether or not the child needs to be receiving a weekly food pack. Should a family require more than what is provided in the weekend food pack, they may benefit from a referral to one of our partnering food pantries.