



Montana Food Bank Network

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Identifying Chronically Hungry Children

The Backpack 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 “chronically hungry” child.

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.

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

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

- Rushing food lines
- Extreme hunger on Monday morning
- Eating all of the food served
- Linger around for seconds

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

A child who complains about being hungry is not necessarily a child who automatically qualifies for the Backpack program. Generally speaking, growing children have an 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 they are hungry. Ask them if they ate breakfast. If they are eligible for free or reduced price breakfast then make sure they are taking advantage of this program. If they say they skipped breakfast find out why. Ask if they had enough food in their house or if it was just the case that they woke up late and didn’t have time for breakfast. If they did eat breakfast, ask what they ate and if it was enough to make them full. You may also ask if they ate dinner the previous night. Once again ask what they had for dinner and if it was enough to fill them up.

By asking a few questions you should be able to assess whether or not this is just a case of normal hunger (where your stomach growls in anticipation for food – not because of a series of involuntary missed meals) or whether this seems to be a frequent incident that results because of food insecurity (the inability to afford enough food). Obviously a child who says there is never enough food in the house or that all they had for dinner were some potato chips is the child who is considered chronically hungry. Even if a child worries that there will not be enough food at home, this is a cause for concern. Food insecurity is the main reason

for the Backpack program. Any child who exhibits this behavior should be considered a candidate for receiving a backpack.

- Assess hunger through further questioning
- Determine reason for not eating
- Ask what they ate

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

Physical Appearance:

Certain physical features are indicators of vitamin and/or food deficiencies. 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 thing 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. Some obesity is caused from poor nutrition in the diet of the child. Any of these physical signs should bring a concern and prompt further questions.

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

School Performance/Behavior:

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

- Excessive absences – due to sickness 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
- Sickness – sore throat, common cold, stomach ache, ear infection, fatigue
- Short attention span, inability to concentrate

Home Environment:

Sometimes children will be very open about what is going on at home. For example a child may say that her dad has lost a job and that the mother doesn't work. By listening to your students and by being in contact with parents the needs of the family can be assessed, which in turn can help determine whether or not the child needs to be receiving a backpack weekly. A single parent family where the parent works on the weekend is probably a situation in which the Backpack program can help a child who may be responsible for fixing their own meal. If the parent is able to fix meals for the child, but may be limited on the amount of food available, it may be more beneficial to refer the family to a food pantry. The Backpack program is designed for children who are not able to get sufficient food at home due to neglect or other circumstances that prevent them from having regular access to food.

- Lack of food resources
- Parent unable to prepare meals

Any child with multiple risk factors as listed above should be considered for the Backpack program.