

Straits Times, 18 Feb 2019, More primary schools keep out sugary drinks

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/more-primary-schools-keep-out-sugary-drinks>)

Some primary schools are stepping up the war on sugar by halting the sale of sweet drinks to pupils.

At least three primary schools have done away with drink stalls - previously a regular feature in canteens - altogether, a check by The Straits Times has found.

More than a dozen others have banned certain drinks from the stalls on their premises.

This comes against the backdrop of the tightening of sugar guidelines for beverages sold in schools in recent years.

Jurong West Primary School, for instance, has not had a drink stall since May 2017, when the last stall owner discontinued her lease.

Instead, pupils take along their own drinks from home, usually water or juices, said Mr Lim Chin Guan, the vice-principal. Vending machines dispensing low-sugar drinks are available to pupils.

Mr Lim said the best time for pupils to adopt healthy habits is at a young age. "On top of educating students on healthy eating habits, we also want to lead by example by not having a drink stall which can be a convenient source of sugary drinks," he said.

Riverside Primary has never had a drink stall since it began taking in pupils in 2013. It also does not have any drink vending machine. Pupils take along water bottles every day and refill them regularly at water coolers.

CHIJ Our Lady Queen of Peace is another primary school to have done away with a drink stall.

Since 2017, all mainstream schools have adopted the Healthy Meals in Schools Programme, a Health Promotion Board (HPB) initiative to get children to cultivate healthy eating habits from a young age. Getting children to drink more water and have fewer sweet drinks is part of the effort.

Under the programme, sports drinks, for example, should not contain more than 6g of sugar per 100ml. Drinks that have permitted intense sweeteners are also not allowed for sale. The Ministry of Education and HPB said audit checks are carried out to ensure schools' adherence to the sugar guidelines under the programme.

Some schools such as Xishan Primary, which banned the sale of carbonated drinks and bottled drinks in its canteen two years ago, have held regular assembly talks on healthy eating habits and sugar content in drinks such as bubble tea.

"This helps them better understand the impact of their personal choices on their health," said Mrs Anne Quek, principal of the school in Yishun.

Parents said they are glad that schools are taking steps to stop the sales of sugary drinks.

Madam Yvonne Kong, whose two children, Gabriel, 10, and Natalie, eight, are studying at Jurong West Primary, said: "Parents cannot always be in school to monitor what their kids eat or drink. It is good that their school doesn't have a drink stall. They can pick up the habit of drinking water instead of sugary drinks."

Madam Chen Chiau Hong, a housewife whose 10-year-old son Chin Ip attends Xishan Primary, said: "So whatever the children choose, it is still healthier than what is sold outside."

Many pupils, such as Chin Ip, a Primary 4 pupil who said he bought sugary drinks only once in a while as a treat, have welcomed the move by schools. "Too much sugary drinks is not good for my health," he said. "Whenever I am thirsty, I would drink plain water."

Research has shown that sugary drinks provide little or no nutritional benefit for growing children.

Nutritionist Pooja Vig of The Nutrition Clinic noted that sugar could also be highly addictive. "It's especially important to limit sugar because not only does sugar affect weight and dental health, but it can also affect mood and behaviour. In some instances, sugar can cause hyperactivity and interfere in a child's ability to concentrate," she said.

Mr Derrick Ong, principal dietitian at Eat Right Nutrition Consultancy, pointed out that healthy habits inculcated from a young age tend to persist into adulthood, which would go a long way towards preventing chronic conditions such as diabetes.

The next step is for parents to be educated on the ways to encourage their children to limit sugar, said Singapore University of Technology and Design faculty fellow Andrew Yee, who has done research on health communication.