Making Nutrition Education in Schools More Impactful by Involving Parents

Tag Words: Nutrition, Nutrition Education, Obesity, Food Choices, Parental Involvement, Meal Preparation, Produce, Education Week

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Summary: Unhealthy food choices being made in and outside of the home is likely a strong contributor of the high incidence of overweight and obese adults and children. In order to halt this growing epidemic in children, schools have implemented nutritional programs which teach kids how to make healthy food choices by hands-on learning. However, cultural practices, socioeconomic factors, and lack of nutritional education by the adults preparing the food, greatly influence and contribute to poor food choices that are learned and made at home. We are suggesting that schools attempt to educate the parents, perhaps by having the children bring “homework” home that involves hands-on meal preparation with the parent or guardian.

Video link: https://youtu.be/lmE32kWMgdA

The Issue: Parents Contributing to Children’s Nutritional Education (JF)
Many school aged children are having nutrition related health issues because they are not eating the appropriate foods. Although schools may provide appropriate nutrition education, children learn what, when and how much to eat at home. These dietary habits, which are influence by cultural background and socioeconomic status, become the norm and whatever the children learn at school may not have much impact in changing the behaviors learned and practiced at home. Perhaps if educators involved the parent (or home meal preparer) in the educational process, long-standing dietary habits can be changed for the better.

Parental Influence of Children’s Diet & Food Choices (AN)
Often times we think that children learn about nutrition and the type of food they eat from health and nutritional classes at school. While they do learn basic food groups and the importance of vitamins and minerals, the majority of education comes from what the child eats at home. If the child drinks sugary drinks and chips every afternoon at home, they’re going to continue consuming these snacks since they taste good and that is what they have access to. Nutritional education always begins with what the adults of the household introduce into the diets of their children from birth. Many times families express their culture and history through their cooking. Cultural beliefs, values, and traditions that are passed down through generations can play a big role in the way children learn what to eat.

Influence of Culture / Acculturation (AN)
Latinos are currently the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S. and this group in particular has a high incidence of obesity influenced by suboptimal dietary choices including low intake of fruits and vegetables and high intake of fat and sugar-containing artificial drinks. In an article examining the incidence of Type 2 diabetes amongst Latinos, four different types of acculturation (the process by which immigrants adopt the attitudes, values, customs, beliefs, and
behaviors of a new culture) practices were identified that likely impact dietary choices (1). Some Latinos may choose to essentially give up their Hispanic culture to embrace the American way of life. They may end up working many hours at low pay and don't have time to cook so they end up heavily relying on fast food or seemingly low cost processed foods. The second acculturation practice that may occur is when Latinos choose to integrate into mainstream society but also continue practicing their cultural practices. Here, parents may have a nine to five job but come home to cook culturally authentic meals for the kids. The third acculturation practice is when Latinos continue to practice their culture without integrating themselves into mainstream culture. This is often seen when Latinos move to projects, ghetto, or barrios - lower socioeconomic regions. Lastly, Latinos may choose to neither retain their culture nor integrate into mainstream society. Oftentimes these individuals and families are lost in between both societies. This happens when parents fail to continue to teach their kids Spanish or expose them to culture but also fail to let them integrate fully into the mainstream culture. Each acculturation practice imposes a different outcome for how food is prepared and what types of foods parents choose to expose their children to.

In the first example (above), children might be expected to become overweight as they lose touch with family practices such as preparing meals together and eating together at the dinner table. When an individual relocates to a different country, the most important things on their mind is usually where they’re going to live and how they are going to feed their family. It has been known that Hispanic/Latino individuals work mainly manual labor jobs, with 33.3% construction workers being Latino, usually beginning their work day at the break of dawn and not ending until sunset (2). Latinos are often also underpaid. The fast paced lifestyle is also causing parents to conform to the cravings of their children. You see this all the time in the grocery store when parents give into buying their kids the chips and cookies as a quick way to satisfy them for a cheap price. Many studies have shown that Latino mothers are more likely to comply to their children’s sugar cravings due to transitional circumstances (3). This parental behavior lets the child know that it is okay to eat these unhealthy snacks and therefore contributes to the overall confusion of nutritional education of the child. All these circumstances contribute to the lack of time to dedicate to cooking an authentic cultural meal or eating dinner together. Having dedicated time to family like family dinners are linked to lower frequency of childhood obesity, higher probability of children eating more fruits and vegetables, less chance of juvenile delinquency, greater academic achievement, and improved psychological well-being (4). Abandoning one’s culture is often put aside with the idea that something greater will come out of it.

The second acculturation practice, integration to mainstream society without giving up cultural practices, combines both the working American lifestyle while integrating other cultural ideals into everyday living situations. For example, in many Latino cultures, children are taught to value their time with family. Here it may be thought that males should work as they are considered the primary breadwinners while the women prepare the meals and take care of the family at home (3). Traditionally, cooking and eating with the family has been an important and cherished time of day in both the Latino and American cultures. Meal times together often brings unity with extended family and creates strong bonds within the nuclear family. Moreover, meals shared with the family teach children about the importance of their own cultural food and what
ingredients and dishes set their culture apart from everyone else. Sadly, family meal sharing has dramatically declined in America to the extent where it is no longer the norm.

**Cultural Food and Nutritional Quality**
Nutritional experts almost always advise that it is much better to eat at home and prepare a meal than it is to eat out. Restaurant food tends to have excessive calories, sodium, and sugar not to mention it is often expensive. Even though it is often overlooked, preparing a meal at home can sometimes encounter the similar problems. Many cultures have a set type of meals that they tend to go to when it comes to preparing meals at home. Latinos are known for heavily starchy foods like corn, plantains, cassava, rice, etc. In this case, the problem is not whether or not they are preparing the meals rather they don't know the nutritional value of the meals they are eating.

Historically, individuals needed the calories and energy from these starchy foods because of long work days whether it was on a farm or some other form of outdoor activity. The problem today is that we live in a primarily sedentary society where it is more beneficial to get carbohydrates primarily from fruits and vegetables than foods like long grain white rice. Eating starchy foods like rice or pasta also wouldn't be a problem if it was only eaten once a day but many Latino cultures consume these foods several times a day, often times surpassing their daily percentage values of carbohydrates. Combining the sedentary lifestyle of modern times and a primarily carbohydrate diet contributes to the increase in type II diabetes and obesity both in children and adults (5). Although parents are the ones feeding their kids these foods, they are not always to blame for the problem. These foods are what they know and are what they have always known. To Mexicans, corn has been the center of their meals since ancient times. Corn originated in Mexico and is not only used to make almost all of their meals but it has always been a highly respected plant (6). Not only is corn historically part of their culture but it is readily available and corn products are fairly cheap. On the downside, consuming a diet based around corn could lead to an imbalanced and calorie dense diet.

One solution to these problems would be to educate parents on how to better improve the nutritional quality of their food. Incorporating high fiber, vitamin-rich nutritional foods like vegetables into their meals rather than removing foods they are familiar foods all together, would more likely be met with enthusiasm. An example of how to do this would be to blend different vegetables like red peppers, onions, broccoli, etc. and use them as a base for soups or different dishes substituting high sodium already prepared adobos. Another way would be to trade long grain white rice for wild rice or brown rice which is less processed. A good way to substitute the carbohydrates and calories of pasta would be to use spaghetti squash or spiraled zucchini. All these changes over time would contribute to lower instances of diabetes and obesity while providing more time spent preparing meals and learning about them.

**Socioeconomic influence on nutrition** (CL)
There are many socioeconomic factors that play a role in how people eat. The main issue is that people tend to develop certain eating habits at a young age due to environmental influences in their upbringing. Three main concerns are cost of food, accessibility to nutritious meals, and knowledge of nutritious food and the healthy ways to eat. Low-income areas have different challenges and trends than high-income areas do regarding these problems, and they all play a role in how these certain populations eat. The general trend tends to be that low-income
neighborhoods do not eat as healthy as high-income neighborhoods because of less opportunity
and different upbringing for the children in these areas. These complications affect obesity rates
and quality of living for certain populations.

Cost for Low-income and High-income Populations (CL)
A low income prohibits families that come from these neighborhoods from buying certain foods
because of cost while higher income families do not have this constraint when making food
choices. These disparities influence these certain population’s health based on the nutritious
versus non-nutritious meals they eat. A rising concern regarding the economic factors associated
with certain populations of people and their choices for food shows that these groups do not have
a healthy diet as they should. They are said to be facing “food poverty or food insecurity” and
this is the cause of the difference of food choice because lower income families may not be able
to afford the food that would be required for a nutritious diet (7). This can influence the nutrition
of not only the parents, but also the children of the family and generations after that since they
eat what is provided for them.

One way to look at these food choices is by observing the choices low-income versus high-
income families make and also the types of places they buy their food from (8, 9). Low-income
groups tend to not purchase the more nutritious foods from grocery stores and high-income
groups will often choose the nutritious option. Food is generally more expensive at the corner
store in a low income neighborhood and may be out of reach for low income families. This is a
consequence of not having access to full service grocery stores that have ample selections of
healthy foods at reasonable cost. Fast food may therefore seem like a better option because of
seemingly lower costs and easier and immediate access. Lower income groups tend to buy food
based on cost and that which gives immediate fulfillment without much concern for nutritional
content. Foods with low salt and sugar and high fiber content are considered to be healthier and
more nutritious as a result. “Disadvantaged groups” even consider healthy foods from grocery
stores a turn-off because they think that they’re more expensive and are simply just not used to
purchasing those kinds of foods.

Accessibility for Low-income and High-income Populations (CL)
Where people live, their circumstances, and their accessibility to certain foods is another factor
affecting how people eat. Low-income neighborhoods are more likely to live in a “food desert”,
an area with limited or no access to full service grocery stores, than high-income neighborhoods.
Some areas, like the city may not have nearby and convenient grocery stores with a good variety
of healthy foods. Those that live in the suburbs, on the other hand, will likely have easier access
to grocery stores with healthy food options at reasonable cost. Overall, the general trend of food
choices in these specific areas is often passed down to the next generation, and children develop
similar styles of eating as their parents, which will then also affect the choices future generations
make.

The area that a certain group of people live influences their choices in food based on what they
have access to. Some areas do not have very good access to healthier foods such as those from a
grocery store and this has effects on their weight and general health. It is found that people who
live in lower socioeconomic groups do not have immediate access to healthier foods in the area
in which they live which supports the notion that accessibility is one key factor associated with
choice of nutritious foods. In higher income neighborhoods, there seems to be more access to healthy foods from grocery stores which would normally result in lower obesity rates for those neighborhoods. More studies have been done to see how where one lives affects how they eat based on their accessibility to certain foods in that area. An analysis of several studies on income level and obesity rates was done in an article “Neighborhoods and Obesity” (10): “In Detroit, Michigan, women who primarily purchased food at supermarkets, consumed more fruits and vegetables than those who relied on independent grocery stores. Participants in the US Food Stamp Program who lived over five miles away from their principal food store, consumed significantly less fruit than those living within one mile of stores”. This specific example identifies the fact that living at further away from a grocery store can impact people’s choices on what kind of food they decide to eat. Since the healthy food at the grocery store is not as easily accessible, these groups of people do not choose to buy the healthier option for meals. These demographics do not only affect individuals, but also affects the entire households of a particular area including the children of these households.

Next, many children are affected by the choices of their parents, and their food choices have a lot to do with the circumstances of their environment and family choices. Children take the food provided by their parents which causes their eating habits to replicate that of their parents. Children of low-income families seem to have a lot of independence in preparing their own meals since the families are larger and the parents cannot always be preparing the meals for everyone. The article, “Children's fruit and vegetable intake: Socioeconomic, adult-child, regional, and urban-rural influences” reported that “Middle to high SES [socioeconomic status] groups reported a much larger variety of F&Vs [fruits and vegetables] available in their homes. Children from low and very low SES groups appeared to be responsible for preparing more meals alone. Children, not adults, thought of vegetables as ‘grown-up” foods’” which shows that these children have a different understanding of healthy foods thinking that they are limited and would not eat certain foods that “adults” eat (11). In higher income families, children still prepare their own meals since parents may be working long hours, but they have more accessibility to the healthier foods and seem to be better guided in what the right things to eat are. This seems to be the most probable assumption, but there are some food choice differences that do not follow these trends and may seem out of the norm.

Lastly, these variations from the normal trend seem to be due to convenience which also plays a huge role in the reason why people buy certain foods over others. Sometimes it is much more convenient to buy fast food for one’s family at night in low- and high-income areas than taking an extra hour out of the day to cook dinner for the family. This can have different effects on both groups showing increased obesity rates in both because of convenience purposes. Studies have been done on the food choices these areas make and their different outcomes that correlate with other factors in their circumstances. Some studies showed different result outcomes regarding fast-food intake in certain households. One study done on children’s fast-food consumption, showed that higher income neighborhoods actually seemed to eat more fast-food on a daily basis. In the article, “Effects of Fast-Food Consumption on Energy Intake and Diet Quality Among Children in a National Household Survey” (12), it was stated that “Multiple logistic regression analyses controlling for socioeconomic and demographic variables indicated that increased fast-food consumption was independently associated with male gender, older age, higher household incomes, non-Hispanic black race/ethnicity, and residency in the South”. These results could be
due to the convenience factor of higher income families being that the parents work long hours and do not get home until later at night. As a result, the children have babysitters who will get them a quick meal or parents will pick up fast-food on the way home from work as an easy dinner. There may also be another reason in which the higher socioeconomic groups have the extra money to spend, so they will therefore purchase more fast-food, and this could show increases of obesity of these higher socioeconomic areas as a result. Children will have money to buy fast food when they want to since money is not as much of an issue in higher-income areas making them have the freedom to buy something quick. The underlying reason for these unexpected outcomes is the convenience factor that plays a major role in the lifestyles of low- and high-income families.

School Systems in Low- and High-income Neighborhoods (CL)

A major factor in influencing how children eat is in the school systems in which they live. Children’s eating habits and choices are widely influenced by not just their parents, but also by their education at their schools. Setting up good nutrition programs to educate individuals at a young age can influence their choice of food in the future; sometimes they can even teach their parents something.

Setting up nutrition programs in schools can be a great benefit for their eating habits and influences on their family’s eating habits. Educating children on general healthy foods to eat on a daily basis for meals can be very beneficial to their health and help lower obesity rates. In the article “Study Shows Strong Nutrition Education Can Lead to Healthier Food Choices by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Recipients” (13), it reported that “children participating in certain nutrition education programs increased their daily fruit and vegetable consumption at home by a quarter- to a third-cup, and were more likely to choose low-fat or fat-free milk. Participating seniors consumed about a half-cup more fruits and vegetables daily”. These results show that implementing programs like these can be beneficial in the eating habits among children at home. Educating children at a young age makes for good decisions in their eating habits as they grow older.

It is also thought that if these kinds of programs were offered throughout every school in every area, this could minimize the differences in nutritional quality in certain areas. The contrary can be shown in looking at the differences in socioeconomic level and how each area responds to the nutrition program presented. These programs may seem to present a larger gap in good nutrition in the low and high socioeconomic groups. This shows how these school programs are of such importance and proper education can actually make gaps between low- and high-income in this area larger. If programs are directed equally at low- and high-income groups, then the higher income families will seem to benefit more from them since parents are more involved in these groups of people than in lower-income groups. Overall, despite the discrepancies between these two socioeconomic groups, in the long run, these educational influences can be very beneficial for the child’s future decisions in nutritious meals.

Cost, accessibility and knowledge of nutritious foods all play a major role in the reason why people choose to eat what they do. One’s diet is developed from a young age, and a child’s upbringing is very important when it comes to teaching them the right things to eat and where to get these foods from. School programs can be used to teach children who can then bring that
knowledge home to their parents; so that it can influence the entire family. Overall, parents are the people children follow, so if parents have more knowledge of the options there are to live a healthier lifestyle, and then the children will be able to follow in their tracks and replicate that lifestyle.

**Better Nutrition Education in Elementary Schools (JG)**

Everyone remembers growing up and learning about the food pyramid in grades K-12. It was the old, go-to tool to teach children about what the 5 food groups were and how often each one should be consumed. These days they now use the revamped MyPlate as the new tool to show children how much of each food group should take up their dinner plates. These concepts and visionary tools are a great way, in theory, to educate children about nutrition but they lack interactive activities and more importantly lack the adequate amount of material that is necessary for children to learn in order to properly and fully understand nutrition. Every person on planet earth eats, so every person should have a full knowledge about what they are putting into their body every day. The nutritional information learned in childhood will carry on with the child for the rest of their lives. It is crucial that nutrition education becomes a bigger part in a school’s curriculum.

**Improve upon already existing or nonexistent health classes and the lessons on nutrition that are being taught to children (JG)**

The “No Kid Hungry Campaign” states that “sufficient time and intensity of the intervention/education is 50 hours of nutrition education which is considered the minimum necessary to effect behavior change in children K-12 (14).” Most public school nutrition programs are implemented into the children’s health classes that cover many topics about how the body functions, importance of exercise and also nutrition. These health classes are often put in place of the children’s gym class for a semester or half a semester to allow room in the schedule to even have a health class. The amount of time that children are in the classroom is also usually less than an hour so it is improbable that children receive the minimum 50 hours of nutrition education. In order to meet the minimum suggested hours to educate and change children’s views and habits with food, the health class needs to be revamped to include more nutrition education.

The USDA has reengineered the old food pyramid visual tool to the new and improved MyPlate tool to help educate children about what their dinner plates consisting of the 5 food groups should look like. MyPlate is a great visionary and illustrative tool for children to use and to understand what a balanced meal should look like. A heavier emphasis should be placed on not only having the children fully understand what MyPlate is all about but to also understand what each food group on that dinner plate does to benefit their bodies. MyPlate recommendations often aren’t being met by many due to the frequent consumption of calorie-dense, larger than necessary meal proportions that are being served at restaurants. A common trend is an increased intake of total fat, saturated fat and sodium which are all contributors to childhood obesity. The US government suggests that over ⅓ of US children and teens are overweight and obese (that is 25 million children). This is why it is absolutely essential that children understand what a balanced plate looks like against an unbalanced plate, which they are being served much too often, to help them avoid the horrors of childhood obesity.
Provide interactive activities/lessons for the children involving handling and tasting different foods (JG)

One way to change food choice behaviors in children is by making lessons more interactive in the classroom. This will get children more interested in learning and eating healthy food. Having more projects that are hands-on and incorporating group activates where children might sample or even prepare a healthy snack in class. A possible lesson could be to teach the children in a hands-on assignment how to prepare an easy and healthy snack using all of the 5 food groups. This will engage the children in a fun activity but also has them learning and understanding how to incorporate different foods into their diets.

To broaden a child’s taste buds and open their eyes to what healthy, nutritious and delicious foods are out there, is to have a food sampling/tasting in class. Have a sampling of some not so common food items such as grains; (quinoa, brown rice), vegetables; (asparagus, Brussel sprouts, cauliflower), fruits; (dragon fruit, avocado), dairy; (1% milk, skim milk, almond milk, cashew milk, coconut milk). Keep in mind however a child’s taste buds are different from an adult so their palate will be more acclimated to raw veggies, mild flavors, smooth foods and room temperature foods. Children also are more interested in food that has been cut up into unusual/fun shapes and this can be seen in a children’s interest in dinosaur shaped chicken nuggets over normal shaped chicken nuggets. Children are more likely to try new things if their friends and peers are trying them as well. This will be a fun social activity for the children that will push the not so adventurous children to try new things. Food intake supports social, emotional, and psychological development so it is key to teach children at a young age how to have a healthy relationship and understanding with food.

Assigning homework for children to complete at home that requires preparing a “healthy” meal based on recipes provided to them will also require interactions with parents which will help educate the parents. This activity is a great hands-on way to get the children to really implement the lessons they’ve learned in the classroom and transfer them to the home setting. The activity also gets the parents involved and active in learning about proper nutrition by helping their child complete their assignment. A food donation could even be provided to the school by a distributor and given to the teacher in charge of instructing the children on nutrition. The teacher would then hand out a different food item, which could be a fruit or vegetable, to each student along with a nutrition newsletter with various nutrition information that the child and parent can read together. Some selected recipes for the child and parent to choose from that include the particular produce item could be provided. From here they can choose which recipe to prepare together. Upon completion of the dish, the child could take a picture of it to hand in to their teacher along with a written assignment to complete. The assignment that will be handed in for credit to the teacher is for both the child and the parent to fill out together answering questions about the dish they prepared along with the parent’s ideas and thoughts on the assignment. This will allow feedback on the success of the assignment.

The parent and child could work together to prepare a healthy meal based on the produce and recipe provided to them from the child’s nutrition/health teacher. This should be viewed as a fun team effort to create something together that is healthy and interactive. After the recipe is completed, the child could take a picture of the dish but also answer some questions about the dish and the overall experience of the assignment with their parents. The parent could also be
given a few questions to answer as a survey for the teacher to see if the assignment was a success and if the parent displays any real interest in furthering their own nutrition education.

One activity that could be assigned is based off the television show “Chopped” on the Food Network. Every week students would be randomly assigned four different ingredients to cook with their parents at home. The ingredients could be bought by the families and would be cheap or could even be something commonly found in everyone’s pantry so every child could participate. After preparing the meal they would either bring it to school or have a written out summary about the experience. In this way, the children will learn about different produce and be able to interact with their families.

**Implementation a gardening program at the school for children to grow their own fruits and vegetables (JG)**

Establishing a school garden would be a wonderful learning experience for the children to grow their own fruits and vegetables at school. This will teach the children where their food comes from and also experience the reward of growing their own nutritious food. This activity can be coupled with a lesson promoting that some of the healthiest foods come straight from mother earth. There is no processing involved in this fresh and natural food. This garden program will require community, possibly parental involvement during the summer months and holiday breaks in which the children will have off from school and cannot tend to their gardens to maintain their crops. The implementation of this program can be made a part of State programs such as the Jersey Fresh “Farm to School Week” which is the last week in September proposed by the NJ Department of Agriculture. In the spring, the children can plant their crops and tend to them during school until June when they have summer break, then have their parent bring them to school during the summer to maintain their crops until school starts up again in September where the children can celebrate their hard work and labor during “Farm to School Week.”

**Educate Parents on Nutrition (JG)**

Parents are the ones in charge of preparing meals for the family putting them in control of what children eat inside the household. It is the parent’s responsibility if their children become obese or maintain a healthy weight because they are the ones putting the food on the children’s plate, not the other way around. This is why it is crucial that parents receive proper nutrition education not only for themselves but also to the benefit of their families. A very profound quote is said by After School Alliance in one of their articles, “Parents are a child’s very first teacher (15).” This is so true not only in nutrition education but in everything. Children learn by example and through their parent’s behaviors. Childhood is also a critical period in which children learn sound food habits mostly coming from their parents. This is why it is so crucial that parents receive the proper nutrition education so that their children grow up mimicking the same healthy habits and behaviors their parents had.

**Have a Webinar workshop for parents that educates them on nutrition that parallels the lessons their children are learning in the classroom (JG)**

It is very difficult to get parents to take the time out of their busy schedules to come to a workshop after school and especially so if the workshop is trying to teach them something. This is why the idea of a webinar is so great! Instead of going out at night taking away from their valuable time, a parent could log onto the school’s website and watch educational videos, read
newsletters and take lessons on nutrition prepared by the school for the parents that parallel the lessons their children are currently learning. The parents can do this in their spare time on their computers, laptops, phones or any other smart device whenever is convenient to them and in the comfort of their own homes. The webinar could also be designed to be watched by parents with their children.

The lessons will be slightly more in depth for the parents but still easy to follow and watch with their children. Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program has even suggested creating lesson plans for parents that parallel the lessons their children are learning in the classroom. If their children are learning about what a grain is at school, the webinar for parents should be about educating parents on what some healthier alternative grains are, like quinoa, and how to prepare it in a dish (16). There could be additional lessons geared specifically toward parents that aren’t taught to the children. These might include how to budget and prepare a grocery list, cooking lessons and healthier substitutes to cook with when preparing food, the importance of family meals, and information on whether they qualify for possible food supplement programs such as SNAP.

Children could be assigned homework that would entail preparing a “healthy” meal based on the recipes provided to them by the teacher. Parents would be encouraged to assist their children in preparing these meals (JG, JF)

The Department of Agricultural and Extension Education stated that the achievement level of children is higher and they also exhibit more positive attitudes when their parents are involved. This statement holds true through all socioeconomic communities and populations (17, 18). Children who helped prepare meals with their parents were found to have a higher Diet Quality Index and ate one more serving/d of fruits and vegetables compared with children who never helped (19). Partnerships between parents, school and community to promote optimal nutrition were found to result in a reduction in BMI percentiles and an improvement in dietary behaviors of low-income, school –aged children (20). These findings support the notion that involving both the parents and the child in meal preparation improves dietary behaviors and is an effective tool in reducing the risk of obesity. Every parent wants serve as their child’s role model and wants their children to succeed but this can only be done if the parent is well educated and has the know how to do so.

Community Action: Suggesting Nutrition Educators Involve Parents

We sent the letter to the editor below to “Education Week” (http://www.edweek.org/info/about/submit-letters.html)

“Making unhealthy food choices in and outside of the home is likely a strong contributor of the high incidence of overweight and obese adults and children. In order to halt this growing epidemic in children, schools have implemented nutritional programs which teach kids how to make healthy food choices by hands-on learning. However, cultural practices, socioeconomic factors, and lack of nutritional education by the children’s parent or guardian providing for and preparing meals at home, greatly influence and contribute to poor food choices. So whatever the children learn at school may not have much impact in changing the behaviors learned and practiced at home. We are suggesting that schools attempt to educate the parents, perhaps by having the children bring “homework” home that involves hands-on meal preparation with the
parent or guardian. Teachers could provide choices of recipes and incorporate produce provided by a local farmer (great for “farm to school” week) or that from a student-tended school garden. An assignment could be based off of the television show “Chopped” on the Food Network where the students would be randomly assigned different ingredients to cook with at home with their parents. Perhaps if educators involved (and also educated) the parents, long-standing dietary habits could be changed for both the child and the parents for the better.”

Julie M. Fagan, Ph.D. Associate Professor, Rutgers University with undergraduate students Arianny Nunez, Caela Lenhardt and Jessica Geiger

1st Response: Thank you! Message sent on May 10 to ewletter@epe.org
2nd Response on May 15, 2016

Julie,

Thanks for writing.

We’re interested in including your letter in an upcoming issue of the newspaper. We have a very large backlog of letters at the moment so it might take a little bit of time to place your letter, but I will be back in touch once I am able to do so.

Was there a specific article, blog post, or Commentary that prompted you and your students to write?

Best,

Cathy

Sent on May 19, 2016
Hi Cathy,

That would be wonderful to have our letter published in Education Week!

My undergraduate students have a strong interest in nutrition education and they thought we should be providing more nutrition content in the curriculum as they don’t remember getting very much education about nutrition when they were in grade school. More education in the classroom may not fix poor dietary habits that have been rooted at home so it was thought that by bringing nutritional educational activities into the home, the education would be more impactful and may actually change dietary habits of the entire family.

With regards to when it might be published - if soon, educators may think to engage students to plant veggies now to be tended over the summer months and potentially harvested as school resumes in Sept. If later, perhaps take advantage of USDA's "Farm to School" month in October (designated by Congress in 2010). There may even be grants to be had to support the initiative. But as mentioned above, we believe it important to also educate the person providing the food and preparing the meals at home.
Looking forward to seeing our letter in print!

Julie

Julie M. Fagan, Ph.D.
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We also contacted several elementary and middle schools in the vicinity of Rutgers University in New Brunswick to determine whether they’d be interested in trying out an interactive parent-child homework nutrition lesson. Our lesson was originally designed to have children bring home a fruit or vegetable once a week for them to use at home to create a meal with their family. The child would then take a picture of their meal to share with the class. Part of the assignment would have them write out an explanation of what they liked about cooking with their parents and what they liked or disliked about the fruit or vegetable. The goal of the program was to have kids be able to spend time with the parents while learning the importance of preparing their own meals rather than going out to buy them.

The following is an email that was sent to several elementary and middle school principals proposing the idea of our program:

Dear (Principal of High School),

As part of our Ethics in Science course at Rutgers University, instructed by Professor Julie Fagan, we are charged with creating a community action plan that relates to our topic of interest. This semester our group decided to learn about diet choices of young people. We specifically targeted how parents influence their child’s food choices and how socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds affect their nutrition.

As part of the solution to nutritional problems that have arisen, we have contacted a food distributor to take part in our Alternative Food Program. Our distributor donates food to pantries and places in need. As part of our Alternative Food Program, we propose that this produce from the distributor be given to students in their health class or other related class to take home at the end of the week. The produce given to the children will come with a flyer explaining the health benefits of the item along with different recipe ideas to use for that particular produce. As part of the program, the children would be assigned a “homework assignment “ to prepare the produce item they received in class using one of the healthy recipes provided on the flyer with the aid of
their parents. Once the dish is complete the children would take a picture of the dish and bring the picture to class.

The objective of the program is to take the education kids receive in their health classes about their nutrition and get their parents more involved and to interact with their children's education lessons, thus better educating the parents in the process. Often knowledge is given in the classrooms and not used in the real world. It has been shown in many studies that children that prepare meals and eat with their families every night are healthier and function better behaviorally and physically.

We are very excited about presenting this information to you or to the school board and hopefully be able to execute the program. If there is a teacher in your school who would be interested to participate in our program, we’d love to go in and speak to them.

Best,

Arianny Nunez, Caela Lenhardt and Jessica Geiger

Emails sent to:

Lincoln Elementary School (JoAnn Kocis)
Livingston Elementary School (Ramirez)
Rutgers Prep. (Maratto and McMillen)
Arthur M. Judd Elementary (Schmidt)
John Adams (Johnson)
Woodrow Wilson Elementary (Sally Dobson)
Robert N. Wilentz Elementary-Perth Amboy (Ronald Anderson)
James J. Flynn Elementary-Perth Amboy (Regina Postogna)
St. Francis Cathedral School (Barbara Stevens)
Woodbrook Elementary (Nicole Cirillo)
Edward J. Patten Elementary-Perth Amboy (Dulce Rodriguez)
Anthony V. Ceres elementary-Perth Amboy (Michelle Valez-Jonte)

Despite our efforts no schools were able to implement our community action into their curriculum. Perhaps for some, our program suggestion came at the wrong time as they may not be offering a nutrition education class at the time of our suggestion or that they have no room in their teaching schedule to accommodate our program. We suspect that there also may be liability and food safety concerns with regards to the provider of the produce. At the end of the day, however, our goal is to assure parent-child interaction at home while cooking meals. For that reason we suggest that schools promote parent-child educational interactions.

References


