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Experiential Cooking Programs for Low-Income Adults: Strategies for Success

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Abstract: Experiential cooking classes for low-income adults can help improve healthy nutrition behaviors. However, nutrition educators and Extension professionals can face challenges in successful implementation of these programs such as difficulties recruiting and retaining participants. Drawing upon lessons learned from a cooking intervention with low-income adults, this article highlights three key strategies for educators to increase program success with low-income adults. These strategies focus on the need for adequate time and facilities as well as identifying GED programs as potential partners for recruiting and retaining adult participants.

Introduction

Over 60% of adults in the U.S. are classified as overweight or obese (Wang & Beydoun, 2007). Effective nutrition education interventions are critical to reverse this trend, especially with groups who are at high risk for obesity such as low-income adults (Drewnowski, & Specter, 2004). Extension professionals are in a unique position in many communities to provide experiential, skill-building food preparation programs for adults (Condrasky & Hegler, 2010; USDA, 2010). These programs can help decrease unhealthy eating behaviors such as reliance on processed foods and frequently eating meals away from home (Keystone Center, 2006) and can help increase healthy behaviors like consuming more fruit and vegetables (Guthrie, Lin, & Frazzao, 2002).

However, hands-on interventions can be challenging for Extension professionals to implement compared to more traditional nutrition education methods and can require more resources such as time and money. As with any intervention, advanced planning and anticipating potential issues is an important part of the process. Three key strategies discussed here can help nutrition educators maximize the success and impact of hands-on cooking programs on participants.

Intervention

The key strategies were identified by Extension professionals who participated in a research project that compared the effectiveness of different delivery methods for nutrition education interventions with low-income adults. The nutrition education intervention discussed here provided hands-on teaching about healthy food preparation. The authors adapted the USDA's 2007 Loving Your Family, Feeding Their Future curriculum and materials by adding food preparation and cooking activities. The result was a series of three weekly lessons titled Nutritious and Delicious: A Recipe for Healthy Families. The goal of Nutritious and Delicious was to teach low-income adults how to prepare easy, healthy, and low-cost meals for their families. Each lesson incorporated hands-on food preparation and cooking skills that involved all class participants.

County Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agents selected locations for classes, recruited participants, and delivered lessons. Over 120 low-income adults in eight counties throughout Tennessee participated in the program. Classes were taught in a variety of locations, including Adult Education Centers, WIC Clinics, and Head Start Centers. A diverse audience of adults participated in the project (64% women, 49% African American, 7% Latino). Most participants were not working (73%), and almost half had not graduated from high school (47%).

At the end of the series of lessons, participants completed surveys about their level of food preparation skills and their intention to improve nutrition behaviors. Over 95% of participants reported that they improved their ability to prepare healthy meals at home including basic cooking skills. Over 90% of participants reported that they planned to increase their daily intake of fruits and vegetables as a result of the program.

As demonstrated by the above results, programs like Nutritious and Delicious can be an effective way for Extension professionals to teach adults important food preparation skills that help increase

healthy eating behaviors. The key strategies identified below will help educators anticipate potential issues before implementing cooking programs in their communities.

Strategy # 1: Allow for Enough Time

Adequate time for experiential cooking programs is essential. By their very nature, hands-on cooking classes typically need longer blocks of time than more traditional nutrition education interventions. The average class length for the Nutritious and Delicious lessons was 90 minutes. Cooking classes should include enough time for learning, food preparation, food tasting, clean-up, and class wrap-up. In addition to increased class time, nutrition educators need to anticipate more preparation time before class to include time for purchasing supplies, organizing and transporting equipment, and advanced food preparation if necessary.

Strategy # 2: Identify Partnerships to Help Recruit and Retain Participants

Recruiting low-income adults to participate in nutrition education programs can be challenging. As reported above, Nutritious and Delicious was delivered to participants in a variety of locations. Class sizes varied significantly by location, with the largest classes conducted with adults attending GED programs at Adult Education Centers. Adults who participated in Nutritious and Delicious through these centers were more likely to have attended all three sessions compared to other locations ($\chi^2(1) = 4.88, p < .05$). Hands-on cooking classes complimented many of the skills that GED participants were learning, such as reading, following directions, and applying math skills. Because these groups were large, students were divided into smaller groups, giving them a chance to practice social skills such as working as a team and effective communication. These findings indicate that it is more effective for nutrition educators to offer cooking classes in partnership with agencies where adults already attend programs on a regular schedule such as Adult Education programs and parenting groups.

Strategy #3: Allow for Adequate Space and Equipment

Cooking classes require facilities that accommodate food preparation. A kitchen is not essential for the success of these classes, but it is important that there is enough space. Portable tools such as electric skillets can be used more effectively with larger groups of adults compared to a facility with a small kitchen and only one stove. Access to sinks to wash hands and to wash food is an important part of the process. Finally, nutrition educators need to be aware of and plan for minimizing food safety issues. These include issues such as how to keep perishable foods at safe temperatures, potential food allergies in participants, and risks associated with burns and cuts. In facilities that do not lend themselves to heating foods, this curriculum included healthy recipes that did not need to be cooked such as recipes using fruits and vegetables that still involved hands-on preparation skills.

Conclusion

Experiential healthy cooking programs for low-income adults can be an important part of helping to prevent and reduce obesity. The strategies discussed above can help Extension professionals and nutrition educators implement more successful cooking programs for low-income adults in their

communities.

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