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Snacks in the Stacks: Teaching Youth Nutrition in a Public Library

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Abstract: Teens in limited-resource communities face challenges to healthy eating. Many youths lack food preparation skills and have limited access to ingredients needed to prepare healthy foods at home. University of Maryland Extension offered healthy food preparation lessons to teen participants of a popular weekly electronic gaming program in a Baltimore County public library. Teens reported asking their caregivers to purchase the ingredients and have prepared the Fun Food Fest recipes at home. The recipes do not use an oven or stove top and can be readily used by Extension professionals in a variety of nontraditional educational settings.

Introduction

Nutrition education and healthy snacks offered in nontraditional educational settings have the potential to improve children's diets. About 25% of children's daily caloric intake comes from snacks (Freedman & Nickell, 2010). Teaching youths to prepare and consume healthier snack foods could significantly improve their diets.

Community-based out-of-school programs that include a nutrition component typically occur in clubs, churches, and childcare settings. During a 10-year period of peer-reviewed studies examining dietary behavioral changes in out-of-school programs, no intervention took place in a public library (Freedman & Nickell, 2010). Since that time period, one San Jose program provides the only documented library-based nutrition education program results (Freedman & Nickell, 2010).

The San Jose public library after-school nutrition workshops did not demonstrate lasting behavior change in food and beverage intake 3 to 4 months post intervention. The 3-week nutrition workshop series had a high dropout rate. Only 25% of children completed all workshops, and the average attendee participated in two workshops, or 3 hours of exposure to the intervention (Freedman & Nickell, 2010). Despite the inability of this low-intensity nutrition education program to produce lasting behavior change, the public library provides a novel venue to reach youths in an informal educational setting.

Program Development

In a limited-resource Baltimore County community, nutrition education was provided at a public library. Sixty-six percent of elementary school children in this community receive free or reduced price meals. The initial efforts to teach a series of youth nutrition lessons began in June 2008 and had a number of barriers to success (e.g., unpredictable attendance, difficulty estimating the amount of food to purchase). After collaborating with the local librarian and the library system's youth services specialist, a new approach was piloted in fall 2008 that focused on improving food preparation skills.

Instead of attempting to lure youths into nutrition classes, the Extension educator began providing Fun Food Fest sessions in conjunction with a popular weekly teen electronic gaming program in January 2009. These ongoing sessions include healthy snack preparation and tasting along with informal small group nutrition lessons. Baltimore County libraries allow food consumption, and providing access to healthy foods is a policy more public libraries should consider adopting (Shapiro, 2010).

A lack of basic culinary knowledge and skills is a barrier to preparing nutritious foods (Condrasky & Hegler, 2010; Corr & Condrasky, 2010). The Fun Food Fest activities focus on the skills needed to prepare healthy foods that adhere to the MyPyramid food guidance system (USDA, 2005). All Fun Food Fest recipes contain simple ingredients, and most of the recipes require only six or fewer ingredients. Colorful, half-page recipe handouts, designed by a graphic artist, are provided for participants to share with family members that can easily be adopted by Extension faculty <<http://www.tinyurl.com/1recipes>>.

For some recipes, only a can opener, bowl, and mixing spoon are needed. Teens never have to heat up a stove or oven, although some recipes do require a blender, microwave, or toaster. The intention of the program is to have teens try unfamiliar foods and to teach them skills needed to prepare healthy foods at home.

The weekly electronic gaming program attracts middle and high school students. Participation varies from 10 to 30 students per session. The Extension educator sets up the food preparation areas on empty library carts outside the gaming room and coordinates food preparation activities with teens during the 2-hour sessions. A library staff member supervises the game room participants, who can sign up for both programs and float seamlessly between the gaming program and Fun Food Fest activities.

Youth visitors not involved in the library electronic gaming program also participate in the nutrition education activities. Maryland ranks second for computer access among state public library systems, and many youths visit the library primarily for Internet access (Henderson et. al, 2010). Unlike a traditional nutrition class series, Fun Food Fest provides nutrition lessons in a drop-by format that makes it easy for youths to learn about healthy eating while waiting for their turn on a computer.

Program Justification

Providing nutrition education through food preparation and tasting activities in a limited-resource community public library has helped youths learn to prepare and taste healthy new foods. The students are hungry after

school and are more willing to try unfamiliar foods they initially thought were undesirable (e.g., black bean dip; hummus). They are also influenced by their peers and encourage each other to try new foods.

Fun Food Fest participants have prepared and tasted more than 35 healthy recipes. In the process, they have learned basic culinary skills. Participants have stated that they share the recipes at home and that their caregivers have purchased the ingredients so that they can prepare the foods themselves. As an example, 3 weeks after trying a Banana Split Breakfast recipe, one teen male participant said he has been "making the recipe at home a lot." "My mom likes the banana split breakfast too. Now she buys the ingredients so I can make it myself."

Other participant statements that support the utility of the Fun Food Fest library nutrition education program include:

- "The program has changed the way I eat. I eat more healthy foods now. I used to eat junk. Now it's rare that I eat that food."
- "Not that I ate badly, but the food day has definitely helped improve the way I eat."
- "I started eating healthier foods like pita pockets."
- "This food is good. I make it at home."

Implications

Learning to prepare healthy foods is a challenge for limited-resource youths. Extension professionals can use Fun Food Fest recipes to teach basic culinary skills in nontraditional settings where a kitchen is not available. Because only portable food preparation equipment is needed, most youths can safely apply their new culinary skills at home without adult supervision.

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