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Food Pantries: Food and Nutrition Education in a Non-Traditional Setting

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Food Pantries: Food and Nutrition Education in a Non-Traditional Setting

Abstract

This article describes an informal approach to delivering nutrition education to a limited resource audience in a food pantry. Improving dietary quality by increasing vegetables and fruits, and safe food handling were the main focus of the education. Extension educators created simple and quick main dishes using foods only from the food pantry. Nutrition education materials focusing on food safety were distributed. Ability/flexibility to create a fast and easy main dish dependant upon foods available, developing trust and rapport with staff and clients, cultural appropriateness, and language barrier issues should be considered when delivering an Extension education program in food pantries.

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Introduction

Two-hundred thirty-nine million pounds of food per month were distributed to food pantries in the United States in the year 2000. Of those households utilizing one of the 32,737 food pantries, 70% experienced food insecurity, and 33% experienced food insecurity with hunger (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004). Individuals with food insufficiency consume less than the recommended servings of vegetables and fruits. Over time, these individuals will have an increased risk of developing chronic diseases such as cancer and heart disease (ADA, 2002).

Although some foods available at food pantries are low in vitamins and minerals such as vitamin A and C and calcium, nutrition education in food pantries is needed (Akobundu, Cohen, Laus, Schulte, & Soussloff, 2004). With exposure to food and nutrition education, participants can then use foods available at pantries to create safe and nutritious meals for their families.

Word of Life Food Pantry

The Word of Life food pantry serves clients primarily from the Kaka`ako district of Honolulu, Hawai`i. All clients are welcome; however, the focus is to reach limited resource families who are homeless, living in transitional shelters, or low-income housing. The only requirement for the participants is to have a "large" family, which is defined by a single parent having at least two children or couples having at least four. The average family income reported was \$800-\$1,200 per month. This is below the federal poverty guideline for a family of four in Hawaii, which is \$1,806 per month (DHHS, 2004).

An average of 45 families visited the Word of Life food pantry each week. Approximately 375 families visited the food pantry during the 8-week informal food and nutrition educational sessions. Forty percent of those families attended the food pantry for more than four of the sessions. Ethnic makeup varied: 40% were Micronesian, 20% were White/Caucasian, 13% Chinese, 12% Filipino, 7% Hawaiian/Part Hawaiian, 3% Black/African American, 3% Samoan, and 2% Hispanic.

Nutrition Education

Improving dietary quality by encouraging variety, increased consumption of vegetables and fruits, and safe food handling were the main focus areas of the intervention. Nutrition education materials were created and distributed to participants focusing on choosing nutritious foods and safe food handling. Main messages included:

- When in doubt, throw it out
- Wash hands before preparing and consuming food
- Rinse lids of canned goods before opening

Participants were also encouraged to take a weekly inventory of the fresh produce in their refrigerator, discard old items and to replace it with new vegetables and fruits from the food pantry.

Program Delivery

Extension educators created simple and quick meals using ingredients from the pantry that are available to clients. Extension educators arrived at the food pantry 1 hour before opening to the public, selected ingredients, and cooked a main dish in an electric skillet. The main dish was prepared in approximately 20 minutes and put into sample servings. Each main dish consisted of ingredients from three different food groups of the Food Guide Pyramid, specifically increasing the vegetable group. Each serving of the main dish, if prepared at home for consumption as a meal, yielded at least one serving of vegetable. Simple fruit snacks such as cut fresh fruit were also assembled to demonstrate the ease of preparing healthful snacks for children.

Extension educators engaged in informal conversations with participants, explaining preparation techniques as samples were distributed while they stood in line to enter the food pantry. Extension educators asked questions such as "Do you wash your hands before you cook at home?" and "Do your kids wash their hands before they eat?" Handouts were also distributed to reinforce concepts of food safety and proper hand washing.

At the end of the 8-week series, Extension educators assessed program effectiveness through an informal, oral survey. Extension educators casually asked adult participants if they implemented concepts addressed during the nutrition education. Questions included "Did you prepare the dish at home?" or "Do you intend to prepare the dish at home?" and "Do you wash your hands before preparing or eating food?" Extension educators then asked children: "Do you like vegetables and fruits?" and "How do you like to eat vegetables and fruits?"

Results

Of the adult participants, 50% reported preparing the dishes at home; 20% reported enjoying the food, did not prepare the recipe, but intended to do so in the future. Participants reported increasing the frequency of hand washing before preparing and consuming food. Barriers to the survey included language and participants not sampling the prepared foods.

Each week, up to 30 children ages 4-13 years old sampled foods and were exposed to eating main dishes and snacks with vegetables and fruits using different preparation techniques. Sixty percent of the children surveyed reported they would eat vegetables when prepared with meals. The children reported they liked vegetables when it was incorporated in dishes such as spaghetti or in a stir-fry with luncheon meat. Children also reported they enjoyed eating fresh-cut fruit as a snack.

Conclusion

Exposing adults and children to main dishes and snacks that include vegetables and fruits in the food pantry may help to increase consumption of vegetables and fruits. Food pantries may be an effective avenue for delivering food and nutrition education to limited resource audiences. The following should be considered when delivering education in a food pantry:

- Ability/flexibility to create a fast and easy main dish using available ingredients

- Developing trust and rapport with agency staff and clients
- Cultural appropriateness and language barriers

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