



INCORPORATING NUTRITION INTO EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS



The position of American Dietetic Association (ADA) on childcare nutrition states that “all child care programs should achieve recommended standards for meeting children’s nutrition and nutrition education needs in a safe, sanitary, supportive environment that promotes healthy growth and development.”¹⁰ ADA notes that trends in child health have shifted emphasis from the prevention of dietary deficiencies to the promotion of healthful food practices for prevention of chronic diseases. Its position also states that the implementation of high standards for nutrition and nutrition education in child care settings today will have major impact on the health of Americans in the future. North Carolina’s comprehensive *Color Me Healthy* program addresses these nutrition education needs in a lively and engaging manner.

COLOR ME HEALTHY

Color Me Healthy provides fun, innovative, interactive learning opportunities for children ages four and five years. Designed for day-care homes, Head Start classrooms, and child-care centers, the program uses color, music, and sensory exploration to teach children that healthy food and physical activity are fun. The program employed multiple strategies, including education, advocacy, changes in organization, policy change, and changes to the environment, to approach the problem of inactivity and poor eating habits among preschool children.

INNOVATION/CREATIVITY

Color Me Healthy uses the Train the Trainer model. Agents with the North Carolina (NC) Cooperative Extension Service and their county partners are trained annually on how to disseminate the *Color Me Healthy* program to childcare

providers in their county. Agents and their county partners then provide comprehensive training for childcare providers on creative and effective ways to use the program. After attending the training session, childcare providers receive a *Color Me Healthy* kit – a teacher’s guide, four sets of picture cards, three classroom posters, two parent posters, CD and cassette tape with seven original songs, a hand stamp, and reproducible parent newsletters -- at no cost. Many of the materials are available in Spanish.

The *Color Me Healthy* teacher’s guide contains 12 lessons with quick and easy ideas for use during “circle time.” Also included in the teacher’s guide are “imaginary trips” a section on livening up the classroom, and a section on being a role model by eating healthfully and staying active. Picture cards in the kit depict dairy foods, colors of foods, where foods grow, and places to be active. Other materials reinforce the color and health message. Parent newsletters reach out to families to reinforce messages that children are learning in the classroom. Each issue contains an after-work healthy food idea and a “Kids Kitchen” segment that encourages the parent to involve children in food preparation.

Color Me Healthy was developed by faculty from NC Cooperative Extension Service at NC State University and the Physical Activity and Nutrition Unit, NC Division of Public Health. The two lead agencies also partner with the NC Nutrition Network, USDA, and others.

REPLICABILITY

Color Me Healthy is the preschool program for the NC Initiative for Healthy Weight in Children and Youth, which is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



(CDCP). *Color Me Healthy* is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A national *Color Me Healthy* training was offered in August 2003; participants were able to purchase the *Color Me Healthy* kit for the cost of reproduction. Other states may choose to adopt the train the trainer model used by *Color Me Healthy*. They may also find success in creating similar partnerships in their state to address the issue of healthy eating and physical activity for the preschool child.

THEORY BASE/RATIONALE

Color Me Healthy is based on the understanding that health promotion should employ multiple strategies, including education, advocacy, organizational change, policy change, and changes to the environment. It uses the social-ecological model at several levels. *Color Me Healthy* motivates change in individual behavior by increasing knowledge and influencing attitudes of children, parents, and childcare providers. On an interpersonal level, the program targets parents and teachers, recognizing that family groups and teachers provide social identity, role models, and support. On an organizational level, the program changes the policies, practices, and physical environment of an organization to support behavior change by training childcare providers and providing tools to enhance the classroom environment. As members of the community, parents and childcare providers are encouraged to seek out and advocate for the availability of physical activity options. On a societal level, *Color Me Healthy* is part of a larger statewide initiative.

OUTCOMES/EVALUATION DATA

As of January 2003, over 3,500 childcare providers have been trained to use the *Color Me Healthy* kit in their setting. Eight-week follow-up survey data from 445 trainees indicated that 91.2 percent of childcare providers are using *Color Me Healthy* in the classroom. Over 97 percent of trainees surveyed stated that the program increased the physical activity of their children and increased the children’s knowledge about healthful eating. Most childcare providers (96.6 percent) gave *Color Me Healthy* an excellent or very good rating and almost all (99.8 percent) indicated they would use the program in the future.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Childcare providers and teachers welcome the opportunity to incorporate fun, interactive programs that deliver education and fun at the same time.”

— Carolyn Dunn, Associate Professor and Nutrition Specialist
 North Carolina State University
 North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Raleigh, NC
 919/515-9142
 Carolyn_Dunn@ncsu.edu.



QUESTIONS

- 1 **What type of environment does ADA suggest for childcare programs?**
 - a. Warm, welcoming, and watchful
 - b. Indulgent, permissive, and fun
 - c. Safe, sanitary, and supportive
 - d. Exploratory, experiential, and educational
- 2 **Which problems in preschoolers did *Color Me Healthy* address?**
 - a. Hyperactivity and snacking
 - b. Inactivity and poor eating habits
 - c. Pickiness and food jags
 - d. Poor health and overweight
- 3 **Which behavior(s) did *Color Me Healthy* encourage for role modeling?**
 - a. Healthful eating and staying active
 - b. Neat coloring
 - c. Refraining from using inappropriate language
 - d. Napping after lunch with the students
- 4 **Approximately what percentage of trainees said that *Color Me Healthy* increased physical activity of their children?**
 - a. 25 percent
 - b. 57 percent
 - c. 97 percent
 - d. 99.8 percent

ANSWERS
 1. c, 2. b, 3. a, 4. d

REFERENCES

- 1 The American Dietetic Association. Nutrition Standards for Childcare Programs-Position of ADA. JADA 1999;99:981-988.