Making Healthy Eating Fun for Students

Providing students with information alone will not necessarily get them to change their health-related behavior. In order to reach students and catalyze change, education should be fun, integrated, and behaviorally based (the F.I.B. approach). Students learn well when they are having fun and actively participating in their education.

School-based programs are able to provide children with knowledge and skills, as well as with the environment, motivation, services, and support to develop and maintain healthy behaviors. Schools are uniquely positioned to offer an integrated environment that reinforces classroom learning with action.

It has been recommended that healthy eating programs in schools provide both instruction for students and integrate school food service with nutrition education. Because children may not fully understand nutrition concepts, education should offer experiences such as increased exposure and opportunities to select healthy foods. In nutrition education, the school cafeteria is the logical testing ground for information, a place where students can “practice” newly learned eating habits. School food service can be coordinated with nutrition education to reinforce healthy eating messages through changes in the menu and in individual food items to support classroom learning.

The “Milk Matters” program integrated classroom learning about calcium consumption and dietary fat with a school-wide campaign that involved food service, faculty, and other support staff. The use of a well-known national nutrition campaign, the “Got Milk?” milk mustache program, piqued the interest of students, teachers, and parents.

Milk Matters

Goals and Objectives

The primary goals of the “Milk Matters” program were to increase elementary school lowfat and fat-free milk consumption at lunch and to inform students of the benefits of drinking milk. The program objectives were to incorporate fun and behavioral nutrition education into the school setting.

Target Audience

The target audience for this program was the 142 students, kindergarten through sixth grade, at the Divide County Elementary School in northwest, North Dakota.

Rationale for the Intervention

The “Milk Matters” campaign was developed to address two separate issues, calcium consumption and disinterest in milk drinking at lunchtime. A USDA study showed that approximately half of all elementary school students consume inadequate amounts of calcium. Because childhood is a critical period for bone development, boosting calcium intake at school became a priority for the campaign. Poor acceptance of milk in the cafeteria was also a major concern. School personnel noticed that students were dumping out more low-fat and fat-free milk – approximately four gallons a day – than when food service was serving higher fat milk.

The area’s public health nutritionist planned a program in cooperation with the local public health unit and the elementary school to increase consumption of lower fat milk. Resources were limited, necessitating the expansion of partnerships with organizations like the Midwest Dairy Council, which had access to effective and fun national nutrition messages.

Methodology

The “Milk Matters” campaign incorporated educational, promotional, and environmental elements. The nutritionist conducted an in-service for the teachers to inform them of plans and activities. Photographs of several teachers with “milk mustaches” were taken and posted in the school. Each teacher received a packet of materials outlining the daily activities for the week, including classroom presentations by the nutritionist,
daily milk trivia questions, art projects, coloring sheets, and a video on milk from the Dairy Council. Children were asked, through a newsletter to parents, to bring in an empty fat-free or low-fat carton, as a way to encourage families to try a lower fat milk. Each student who brought a carton received a “Got Milk” poster of his or her choice. School cooks wore cow aprons to integrate the “Milk Matters” program into the lunchroom. A contest among classes promoted increased milk consumption at lunch; the winning class was photographed with milk mustaches.

RESULTS

“Milk Matters” was a great success. Students loved being photographed with milk mustaches. Dumping of milk was eliminated completely during the week of the “Milk Matters” campaign. The parent newsletter was highly successful; 92 percent of students brought an empty fat-free or low-fat milk container to school. School personnel continued to monitor the amount of milk dumped. The average amount of leftover milk was cut in half.

LESSONS LEARNED

“Programs like this easily can be replicated through partnerships among public health units, schools, and local Dairy Councils. Schools appreciate nutrition education programs that provide students with an integrated curriculum that links to public health concerns.”

— Sue Grundstad, L.R.D.
Upper Missouri District Health Unit
Williston, ND

QUESTIONS

1. In order to reach students and catalyze change, education should be:
   a. fun, integrated, and behaviorally based (the F.I.B. approach)
   b. exciting, entertaining, captivating, and helpful (the E.E.C.H. approach)
   c. fast-paced, active, and newsworthy (the F.U.N. approach)
   d. kinetic, interesting, and theoretical (the K.I.T. approach)

2. Why is it best to offer school children experiences like increased exposure to and opportunity to select healthy foods?
   a. It takes the burden off of parents
   b. Incidence of childhood obesity will be reduced
   c. Children may not fully understand nutrition concepts
   d. The food service staff enjoys being involved in nutrition education

3. As demonstrated in “Making Healthy Eating Fun for Students,” how can school food service be coordinated with nutrition education?
   a. By offering individual food items that children have learned about in class
   b. By asking food service workers to speak in classrooms
   c. By banning “junk” foods from the cafeteria menu
   d. By starting a fitness program for food service workers

4. What was a primary goal of the “Milk Matters” campaign?
   a. To make drinking milk fun
   b. To inform students of the benefits of drinking milk
   c. To increase milk consumption at home
   d. To promote the Milk Mustache program

5. What lasting effect did the “Milk Matters” campaign have on the discarding of milk in the cafeteria?
   a. Volume dumped increased by 50 percent
   b. No milk was dumped
   c. Volume dumped remained the same
   d. Volume dumped was reduced by half

ANSWERS

1. a
2. c
3. a
4. b
5. d

REFERENCES