

Kids Eat Up Cooking Schools



Getting children involved with food is an effective way to improve eating habits and health. Hands-on cooking experiences can expose children to new foods, teach them about healthful eating and develop their sense of self-efficacy, thereby increasing the likelihood of a change to better eating habits.

In recent years, the play approach to learning has been promoted as an effective way to educate children. Educational play allows children to explore and experiment in a way that builds knowledge, a sense of competence, and enjoyment. The play approach helps children understand and acquire skills through their involvement with the task to be learned and with the environment. It encourages them to participate in an activity because they enjoy it and they enjoy mastering skills. Cooking exemplifies the play approach to learning about food and nutrition.

As home life becomes more complicated, schools are being relied upon more for teaching children some of life's basics such as nutrition. Schools cannot work alone. That is why community health organizations often join together with schools to help promote nutrition well-being, particularly when school resources are limited. Community health organizations also offer learning opportunities outside of school hours—for example, after school or during vacation.

The Youth Cooking Schools campaign exemplifies a successful partnership between Cooperative Extension personnel, schools and community organizations to offer hands-on learning opportunities to lower-income children during summer vacation.

YOUTH COOKING SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

Children need help in developing skills to plan, purchase and safely prepare low-cost, nutritious foods. Fewer parents and caregivers cook family meals, leaving children with limited

opportunities to learn the fundamentals of cooking. The Cooperative Extension Service in Southern Illinois developed its Youth Cooking Schools Campaign to teach youth basic food and nutrition skills in a “cooking school” setting. The program recently completed its sixth summer.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the Youth Cooking Schools Campaign was to help promote healthy lifestyles among Southern Illinois youth by teaching them basic nutrition, food safety, food selection and food preparation skills. Objectives included learning to follow safe food practices, preparing food items themselves and selecting foods according to the Food Guide Pyramid. The program also aimed to increase the children's confidence in their abilities to prepare nutritious food for themselves and their families.

METHODOLOGY

The Youth Cooking Schools consisted of five half-day sessions in a one-week period in the summer. It was promoted through local advertising and publicity efforts.

The curriculum was developed by the Extension Educators in Southern Illinois and consists of an instructor's guide, activity sheets for the participants and reference materials. Daily “hands-on” preparation of two or three recipes focuses on different sections of the Food Guide Pyramid. Food purchasing and safety are incorporated into the food preparation modules.

Extension Educators hired, trained and supervised graduate students in food and nutrition to work in the schools. In addition, volunteers—one for every five students—assisted the graduate student instructors.



RESULTS

In 1997, schools were offered in 15 different locations throughout Southern Illinois, reaching over 250 primarily low-income youth eight to 12 years of age; 16 locations participated in 1998.

On the first day of the 1997 summer session, students were given a pre-test to determine their baseline knowledge of nutrition and food. The same test was administered at the conclusion of the program. According to the post-test results, a higher percentage of children reported that they were following safe food practices, were preparing food items themselves, and were selecting foods according to the Food Guide Pyramid. A follow-up questionnaire mailed to the students three months later showed that they had continued their healthful behaviors.

LESSONS LEARNED

“One reason this program has been successful is that it brings Youth Cooking Schools to children’s communities, rather than relying on families with limited time and financial resources to transport their children. Youth Cooking Schools have been held in low-income housing areas, community buildings, churches and grade schools—wherever children can be easily reached.

Outside funding has also contributed to the schools’ success. The families of a majority of the children who have participated would not have been able to afford a registration fee.

The children gained more than nutrition and food knowledge. They learned how to work together in a group, boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem.”

— Joy Richey
 Extension Unit Leader
 University of Illinois Extension Service



QUESTIONS

1. **Which does not describe the play approach to learning?**
 - a. It encourages physical activity
 - b. It allows children to explore and experiment
 - c. It helps children understand and acquire skills
 - d. It encourages participation
2. **Community health organizations can help schools by applying teaching assistants.**
 - a. True
 - b. False
3. **The goal of the Youth Cooking Schools Campaign was to:**
 - a. Encourage food safety
 - b. Promote healthy lifestyles
 - c. Teach cooking skills
 - d. Shop economically
4. **Which is not a success factor for the Youth Cooking Schools?**
 - a. The schools are brought to the children’s communities
 - b. The schools require parent participation
 - c. Grantors subsidize the program
 - d. Children enjoy participating in the program

ANSWERS:

1. a. False, community health organizations can offer additional resources and learning opportunities outside of school hours
2. b. False
3. b. Promote healthy lifestyles
4. d. Children enjoy participating in the program