BEHAVIORAL NUTRITION: What it is and what it means to you

Behavioral science is elucidating some of the problems and strategies necessary to help people change their dietary behaviors. An early premise was that people would change their eating behavior to enhance their own or their family’s health if they were educated about the health benefits of eating certain nutrients or foods. However, a comprehensive review of the literature reveals that knowledge-based nutrition education programs alone do not result in dietary behavior change.

Behavioral science explains why knowledge-based education alone does not change dietary behavior. Dietary behaviors are the result of behavioral, personal, familial, social, and physical environmental factors, collectively termed mediating variables. The best way to change dietary behaviors is to change these factors. For example, many children eat only fruit, juice and vegetables (FJV) that they like and are familiar with; behavioral strategies must be developed to expose them to a greater variety of FJV that they might like. Since children can only eat the foods that are available in their environment, an environmental factor could be changed to increase the availability of FJV at home and to select venues when eating out that offer favorite FJVs. Dietary change activities must target these mediating variables.

It is a major paradigm shift to change the target of nutrition education from the goal of increasing knowledge to that of modifying factors that influence dietary behaviors. Published literature offers some guidance as to why people eat, or do not eat, particular foods. However, qualitative research, like focus group discussions or intensive interviews with the target population, is necessary to develop a full picture of usual eating habits and influencing factors.

Designing nutrition education programs that are likely to change dietary behaviors is a complex task. Once mediating variables are identified and prioritized, strategies for changing them must be developed. There is no published literature of clearly identifiable change strategies. Much of this work has been intuitive. How can nutrition educators convince mothers to have more FJV available at home for their child to eat? Perhaps mothers respond to different messages; some respond to their child’s requests, others respond to messages from educators, and still others may require a different approach. This is an area in need of more behavioral research.

Once designed, dietary change programs must be implemented. Relying on classroom teachers, health educators, and others to implement programs necessitates extensive training to ensure that programs are implemented properly. Poorly implemented programs are unlikely to have the desired effects on mediating variables. Furthermore, nutrition educators need to know that program participants can and do use education materials in the manner intended. For example, if participants receive recipes, what can be done to increase the likelihood that they make the recipes, not once, but many times? Pretesting recipes with members of the target group to be sure they like them is a first step. Having them prepare and taste the recipe in a class or education session is another effective behavior change strategy.

Nutritionists are encouraged to creatively apply these behavioral nutrition principles to their education programs and submit them to the Dannon Institute for consideration for the Dannon Community Nutrition Award.

Tom Baranowski, Ph.D.
Professor of Behavioral Nutrition
Children’s Nutrition Research Center
Department of Pediatrics
Baylor College of Medicine
Houston, TX 77030-2600

REFERENCES
