SNAP-Ed Instruction Helps Kids Eat Healthier

INTRODUCTION

Do nutrition education classes conducted in elementary schools by instructors trained in the principles of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) influence children to eat healthier foods? “Yes,” according to a study done by researchers from the University of Minnesota (U of M) Extension Center for Family Development.

Data from the study show that attending the nutrition education classes increased the children’s:

- Willingness to try new vegetables.
- Vegetable consumption in the short term — immediately following completion of classes.
- Fruit consumption in the long term — 6-10 months later, depending when classes were completed.

The study also showed that children transferred what they learned to other family members beyond healthy eating to related habits, such as participating in community gardens, helping with meal preparation, and more.

BACKGROUND

During the school year 2012-2013, nearly 400 third-grade students across Minnesota attended up to seven nutrition education classes, called “Go Wild with Fruits and Vegetables,” led by trained U of M Extension SNAP-Ed educators. Specifically, 396 students from 22 schools attended the classes, with about half attending classes in fall 2012, and the rest in spring 2013.

The goal of SNAP-Ed is to improve the likelihood that people eligible to receive SNAP benefits will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and become more physically active in order to improve their health. As the “Go Wild” title indicates, the 2012-2013 classes focused on choosing to eat healthier foods — specifically more fruits and vegetables.

The team of FD researchers surveyed the students, as well as their parents and other primary caregivers, four times between October 2012 and October 2013. The goal was to evaluate the
impact of SNAP-Ed programming on the children’s attitudes and behaviors regarding healthy eating in particular and other healthy habits in general.

PARENTS’ AND CAREGIVERS’ RESPONSES — TWO THEMES

Information provided by parents and primary caregivers who responded to the surveys revealed two key themes:

- An increased propensity for children to try new foods after attending nutrition education classes.
- Positive “ripple effects” from the classes on other family members’ food and eating-related habits.

Parents and caregivers also said discussion about the “Go Wild” classes at home influenced other family members’ food choices and willingness to try new foods, as well as food-related habits, such as encouraging gardening or helping with meal preparation.

CHILDREN’S RESPONSES — INCREASED FRUIT CONSUMPTION

Information provided by children responding to the surveys revealed two key findings:

- Children ate more fruits both immediately after taking classes and 6-10 months later.
- Children ate more vegetables immediately after taking the classes (but not in the long-term).

These results are consistent with research showing that nutrition education programs similar to “Go Wild with Fruits and Vegetables” report more success in increasing children’s long-term consumption of fruits than with vegetables. Researchers attribute children’s greater inclination toward fruits to their sweeter taste.

Despite the less encouraging findings on vegetables, the good news is that children did get excited about trying new vegetables at least for a short time following the “Go Wild” classes. The challenge now is to figure out ways to sustain that level of interest over the long term.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

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