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ABSTRACT

Parents and the extended family are the most influential factors in the child's lifelong eating habits, general health and development, and brain power. Convincing parents of diet components that insure adequate nutrition is of prime importance; if the home does not support the content of the school's nutritional curriculum, the child may feel caught in the middle between conflicting values. Several studies have shown that parents can accept a nutritional curriculum if an effort is made to educate them at the same time as their children. Many activities can be undertaken to involve parents in teaching about nutrition. For example, parents may share family food customs with their children's classes. One of the advantages of involving parents directly is that the nutritionist can model for the parents ways in which they can teach their children about food. Parents can also be educated about nutrition by providing them with printed material or through scheduled group meetings where information is shared through films, demonstrations, lectures, and activities. Finally, actively involving parents in projects designed to incorporate new ideas about nutrition is a more effective way to change established beliefs than merely telling children and parents what to do. (CB)

PARENTS AND NUTRITION

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THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN NUTRITION

The role of parents in the nutrition of their children begins of course, before birth. Numerous studies reported in the medical literature attest to the importance of good nutrition of both parents to insure a healthy child. After birth and throughout the child's years in the home, the parents and the extended family are the most influential factor in the child's life-long eating habits, general health and development, and brain power. Parents, however, are often unknowledgeable about the close connection between diet, health, and learning.

Shneour and Shneour (1977, p. 9) point out that:

> Food has always had magical and religious implications. Benevolence and peace are associated with sharing meals in common. Taboos are rationalized in both primitive and advanced societies. Casting spells on food to be eaten by an enemy can do him serious harm, it is believed in several primitive societies. On the other hand it is assumed that the dietary habits of "civilized" people are rational, while those of primitive tribes are irrational superstitions. The Navajo Indians of the United States consider gophers a delicacy, but the chronically meat-deficient poor of the southern states, where gophers abound, would rather starve than consider gopher meat as food. . . the potato was opposed for a legion of what now seem nonsensical reasons, i.e., that its leprous shape made it a cause of leprosy. During several of the recurring famines of Europe, many starvation deaths could have been avoided had the potato not acquired its undeserved reputation for evil.

A scientific group headed by Dr. John Cassel from the University of South Carolina, studied the huge infant mortality rate (27%) in one of the Zulu tribes of South Africa. He reported (1957) that the reason was the dependence on maize as the principle staple of their diet but the Zulu women insisted that this was the diet that had made their ancestors strong and virile. He searched the tribal records and the history of the tribe and found that maize

had been introduced by white settlers and that the Zulus had been meat eaters and milk drinkers when they had been pastoral and had kept large herds of cattle. With the assistance of the tribe's elders, the women eventually changed their diets and the mortality rate after 12 years was cut to 10%.

Convincing parents of the components of a diet to insure adequate nutrition for adequate brain growth and optimum health of their children as well as to develop life-long habits of good nutrition is of prime importance. Schools may have developed excellent curricula with interesting and motivating activities but if the home does not understand or support the content of the curriculum or even admit to the need to examine eating patterns and choices, the child may feel in the middle of a tug-of-war between conflicting values of the home and the school. A review of the literature on Parents and Reading (Boehnlein & Hager, 1984) has shown that higher achievement results whenever the home is directly involved in the education of the child. We suggest that the same holds true for any aspect of education, nutrition education included.

Parents may be more accepting of the nutrition curriculum than we believe. Kolasa, Wenger, Paolucci, and Bobbitt (1970) surveyed families to determine how and if families were learning at home and the feasibility of the home as a learning center. Of the 15 learning categories listed by families, four were relevant to food and nutrition; family feeding, child care, adult care, and health. Family feeding was seen as a long-term learning activity and ranked first in time persued but surprisingly was reported as not an activity to be learned at home. Based on personal interviews, the researchers concluded that families did not view themselves as competent to educate other family members. They recommended that linkages between home and formal and nonformal educational learning institutions must be strengthened.

Families did report that mass media such as television, magazines, books, and newspapers were the chief resources for their learning. Few families used professional resource persons but depended more on friends, neighbors, and relatives for information. Kolasa et. al. suggested that professionals use local libraries to house nutritional information, services, equipment, games, puzzles, etc. so that they can provide meaningful intervention in nutrition learning. We wonder why they did not consider the schools as a better choice to reach more people since all children are in school, or at least there is more contact between parents with the school than with the local library. Those who need the most education in nutrition may not use the public library.

Stewart, (1971) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has suggested that parents can be involved in the nutrition program through the school disseminating nutrition information. Publishing menus of school lunches and then providing family-size recipes of favorites of the children is one way. Another contact is through the PTA which can also disseminate information on nutritional and economic benefits of typical lunches.

Niedermeyer and Moncrief (1975) conducted a study for the Dairy Council of California to determine what nutrition-related skills can and should be taught to children in the primary grades. Among the components of the study was providing each home with a short pamphlet which explained food classification and balanced meals and suggested ways in which families could help children practice and apply the skills learned at school. While the pretests showed a significant difference between white and minority students, the posttest resulted in no noticeable differences suggesting parent satisfaction and cooperation. Interviews with the parents confirmed that children were enthusiastic about the program--so parents were then aware and supportive of the program.

The earlier nutrition education is begun also may be a crucial factor. Quigley (1977) reported a study in which three and four year olds enrolled in a daycare center and their families were familiarized with wholesome, nutritious food as opposed to junk foods. Using the centers' monthly newsletter the parents were introduced to a planned nutrition education program to be conducted by a graduate student as a project in a Human Growth and Development course at San Diego University.

Quoting part of the parent information:

> Emphasis will be on introducing basic food needs for healthy, growing children through creative food experiences. The objective is to see if educating children about wholesome foods will influence their food preferences and selections at home. A questionnaire will be sent home along with information on nutrition and what we will be doing with children: making foods, sprouting seeds, and playing games that reinforce good nutrition habits.
>
> You are what you eat. Studies indicate that many Americans are eating too much of the wrong foods "empty calorie" snack foods high in sugar and saturated fat, low in nutrients. Our children are most susceptible to these foods, being influenced by advertising which glamorizes poor eating habits, encourages children to eat large quantities of "junk food" displacing nutritious, wholesome foods.
>
> During the ages of three and four, children have the smallest appetites of their lives which also reflects the slowest growth rate of the life cycle. It is during this period when snack foods rather than whole meals can be a major part of the diet.
>
> Food habits which build good health are not acquired naturally, they must be learned. Children have to be educated to make good food selections. With the right food experiences now, our children may be spared the unpleasant cost, both physical and financial from tooth decay, obesity, diabetes, bowel cancer, and heart disease which are all caused, in part, from the food we eat. . .(pp.8-9).

Quigley reported that in addition to the newsletter, he provided parents with a handout on "Healthy Snacking" and a One Page Nutrition Book. Parents,

80%, reported reading the information and desiring more. However, only 35% reported being influenced by the information which could be interpreted to mean the information confirmed established food habits for the majority. Parents gave positive feedback about the project and indicated a need for nutrition in school as children are more receptive in the school situation.

Activities to Involve Parents

In addition to providing printed information for parents, others have demonstrated that the direct involvement of parents in school nutrition activities is valuable. Parents, in consultation with the teacher before hand, can share family food customs or favorite recipes with their children's class. Children can learn that unknown foods can taste good at tasting parties, for example. Symbolism of food, such as eggs at Easter, or unleavened bread of the Exodus, can be explained. Teachers should be cautious about ethnic recipes, however, since many are high in cholesterol and sugars. Why these foods were usually reserved for only special occasions can be contrasted with the ready availability of white sugar today.

Chethik (1976, p. 46) suggested that children as young as six can be taught that you are what you eat and can be encouraged to evaluate their eating habits. Parents can be asked to reinforce what children are learning at school. If the home values school learning then children will adopt the values. Thus, the school must prepare parents.

She suggested the following note to be sent home:

> During the next few weeks, your child's class will be doing nutrition activities. Is there anything in particular you would like him or her to learn? How to pack a lunch? How to read labels on a can? Which snacks are nutritious?

Another activity suggested by Chethik is to invite a parent to help out in class as a "nutrition volunteer" by helping children prepare a basic four

salad or a basic four pizza, or an "unbreakfast breakfast." Also suggested was organizing a "Try It You'll Like It Club" and involving parents, suggesting that if a child tries a food they have never tried before, to write down the child's reaction to it on a form and send it back to class. Having the children plan a party for parents by doing all the planning, shopping, preparing, and serving involves parents, too. Children might present one minute commercials as entertainment during the party which educates the parents about nontraditional but nutritious meals such as selling their parents on the idea that a peanut butter sandwich is a good breakfast.

Sending home a list of recommended books that parents can read with their children that involve them on an affective level has been successful. Chethik suggests that fiction reaches youngsters more effectively than the nonfiction often recommended to parents by librarians. She suggests the following:

> Mexicali Soup by Kathryn Hitte and William Hayes, Parents' Magazine Press, 1970.
>
> Bread and Jam for Frances by Russell Hoban, Harper, 1964.
>
> Dandelion: The Lion Who Lost His Roar by Rose Stoia, 4165 Fowler Dr., Bellbrook, Ohio 45305 (he ate empty calories).
>
> Old McDonald Had An Apartment House by Judith Barrett, Atheneum, 1971.

In a unique program, Dixon and Rikard (1975) educated both parents and their children who were patients at the James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children, a part of Indiana University Medical Center in Indianapolis. Believing that children should take part in their own health care and recovery, they did projects with the children to enhance their health status and life styles. Parents were involved by being present during the projects.

In one project, preschoolers explored the characteristics of red and green cabbage, both raw and cooked while parents were shown the openess that children have in learning about and tasting various forms of food. The children looked at the structure of the head of cabbage, pulled off the leaves, chopped it into bite-sized pieces and carried samples to everyone in the room. The adults discussed with the children how the cabbage felt, how it crunched when they bit into it, and how the tastes of the two cabbages differed. Older children cooked some of each in an electric frying pan, and everyone sampled how it tasted after it was cooked. As they ate, vegetables in general were discussed.

Then, while the children cleaned up the area, the parents met with the advisors over coffee in another lounge and discussed ways to introduce vegetables into the diet of a preschooler. These sessions were very helpful, particulary to parents of chronically ill or handicapped children whose food experiences are rather limited. Parents who are often anxious about the illness of their child were happy to share food and fun with their youngsters (p. 8 & 10).

When planning activities to involve parents and children, Jameson (1975) cautions us that we must not let our own food prejudices and cultural background keep us from recognizing that we must teach accurate nutrition information in a context relevant to each child and family. She tells of being a student in a health education class which was purporting to tell students ways to help low-income children change and improve their eating habits. The breakfast suggested was a glass of orange juice, a glass of milk, a plate of bacon strips and scrambled eggs, two slices of buttered toast and a serving of cereal. Her first thoughts were that her own middle class

children would never be able to eat such a large breakfast and her second, reinforced by another student was that the speaker did not understand the realities of being poor. Bacon and eggs were probably out of their economic capability.

Jameson suggests that we must have parents actively involved in order to learn how they use food with their own children--rewards and punishments?--and to let them have an opportunity to ventilate some of their own ideas and feelings. This then, will provide the basis needed, to introduce new ideas to parents about nutrition so that school instruction will be more effective.

One of the advantages of involving parents directly is that we can literally teach parents how to teach their own children. We can model for them and we can also provide step by step instructions or even learning activity packets that can be taken home much the same as a library book is borrowed from a library. For example, parents can be taught that children need to touch, smell, and taste a new food--something that might not be considered "good manners" if done at the table during dinner time. Scheunemanna (1976) found that when given these experiences, children generalized this willingness to try certain foods to other new foods. Parents can be shown how to integrate basic skills such as counting--counting how many apples are needed if every member of the family will get one; how to use one's imagination and body creatively--make yourself look like an apple; observing changes which result from applying heat to a food; enlarging children's vocabulary by teaching the names or vocabulary words related to foods--stem, seed, peeling, sweet, juicy etc.

Sharing simple recipes with parents that children can make on their own with simple equipment is another way of involving parents. Anselmo(1975)

gives recipes for corn bread, alphabet pretzels, and noodles, that can be made by the preschool child. A teacher might take Anselmo's article which is directed to the teacher in a classroom situation and simplify it giving instructions for the parent to do the lesson with the child at home. Writing it in step by step fashion and illustrating it with line drawings will make it more easily read.

Educating Parents About Nutrition

As we are educating children in nutrition, we simulataneously can be educating parents with simply written or graphically illustrated materials that parallel the information the child is learning in school. If in health, we are doing a unit about vitamins and minerals and their effects on the body, we can send home a basic food guide such as Table 1 and 2 reproduced from an article by Jani and Jani (1978) which appeared in Academic Therapy. Table 2 from their article, the "ABCs of Nutritional Deprivation in Children" can alert parents to signs and symptoms children exhibit due to poor diet.

There are many organizations which monitor the amounts of certain ingredients in foods. One of them is the International Institute of Natural Health Sciences who has published a fact sheet entitled the Hidden Sugars in Foods. After discussing this with the children, copies of the sheet should be passed on to parents with some brief notes from the teacher concerning recent governmental recommendations to reduce the amount of simple carbohydrates in our diets and to replace them with complex carbohydrates. A list of the latter should be provided for the parents, also.

Other examples of food charts are the Easy Eating With Canada's Food Guide by Winarski (1976) or newsletters, which seem to be on the increase from local medical centers. Many of these newsletters, which hospitals buy and insert their own name on the head, are published by a parent company. Patient Education Council Ltd.

Trent and Kinlaw (1979) used comic books to reach lower income homemakers. They report research evidence that among the lower educational economic segments of society, a stigma may be attached to reading comics as it identifies one as incapable of reading more complicated materials (White and Abel, 1963). But, if the comic books are based on soap opera figures, it seems homemakers are more motivated to read them. Trent and Kinlaw used characters from The Edge of Night, with permission of appropriate persons, of course, and taught six basic nutrition concepts through a set of six comic books. The books were sent--one each week for six weeks--to homes, and the emotion packed story concluded in book six. Positive results were reported in that 94% of those who received the books read them and gained on a post-test in both knowledge and practices related to the six concepts.

Besides printed information, we can reach parents through scheduled group meetings where information is shared through films, demonstrations, lectures, and activities. Any activity we do with children about attitudes towards foods can be done with parents, also. Harbour (1976) describes a value recognition activity useful to understand how our values effect our choices of foods. Small groups are given a set of five different colored three-by five-inch cards upon each of which is written one of these: TRADITION, TASTE, COST, CONVENIENCE, NUTRITION. These are the value cards. Each group is given a situation or all the groups can be given the same situation. For each, the

groups rank the value cards in order from the value most important to least important to them. A sample situation is "you are planning the foods to serve at a friend's birthday party" (p. 204). Questions for discussion would include why our values vary from situation to situation, are food values equally important to each person, what causes us to revise our values, is one way of viewing food better than another, and what factors influence how we see and use food?

Films are often an excellent way to convey information to parents as they are viewed as produced by "experts" who know more than the classroom teacher. Films can be chosen to teach prevention of problems or simply to alert one to changes in our diets that have occurred--"Eat, Drink, and Be Wary" is such a film. Others such as "Snacking--Garbage in Your Gut" and "Cholesterol--Eat Your Heart Out" can be obtained from the local library.

Ruth McNabb Dow published a very thorough nutrition unit in the Illinois Teacher, March/April, 1976. It has activities, lesson plans, resources, and ideas for talks and demonstrations to be done by the students. The latter can provide ideas for topics to be presented to parents at open houses or parent organization meetings.

Conclusion

We have presented reasons for involving parents in nutrition education and samples of what others have used with success. Close cooperation between home and school is essential in all aspects of education, but especially so in the area of nutrition education. Our response to others and to our own needs, has been determined by the way in which food was used with us as children.

Changing long held beliefs or habits is not easily accomplished merely by telling children and parents they should do so. Rather, we need active involvement projects that allow parents to incorporate new ideas into their belief system with minimal threat to their cultural values.

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