

Family Living Programs Raising Healthy Eaters

Situation

In Wisconsin, 25 percent of 2 to 5-year-old children are either overweight or at risk of being overweight. Poor eating habits and limited physical activity are modifiable factors that contribute to overweight. According to research, 76 percent of children between 2 and 5 years have poor diets.

To prevent obesity later in life, early interventions including both the child and family must be instituted. Providing parents with knowledge can promote success in feeding and healthy eating behaviors. UW-Extension Family Living educators with experience in both parenting and nutrition are in the ideal position to conduct this education in their counties. Currently, there are few effective interventions that link parenting and nutrition education.

Response

To address this issue, state Family Living staff submitted a grant in 2005 and obtained funding from the Centers for Disease Control. Nutrition Specialists Gayle Coleman and Heather Harvey adapted an existing Michigan curriculum for use with parents of 2 to 5-year-olds in a small group setting based on facilitated dialogue techniques. The *Raising Healthy Eaters* curriculum addresses child development, parenting skills, nutrition, and age appropriate feeding behaviors. *Raising Healthy Eaters* consists of eight user-friendly lessons that include a variety of recipes, group discussion questions, skills-based activities and goal setting.

Six Family Living educators piloted the curriculum. Twenty-four participants completed all the lessons. Participant retention was 79 percent. Eighty percent of the participants utilized at least one social assistance program targeted to low income individuals and 93 percent of participants had at least one child in the target group, aged 2 to 5 years. Participants were 74 percent white, 22 percent Hispanic and 4 percent Native American.

Outcomes

Following the program, a survey adapted from Michigan State University was used to assess parents' knowledge, confidence and behaviors related to feeding their child. In addition, parents were asked to participate in a 24-hour recall of what their child ate the previous day and what they (the parents) ate at one meal that they shared with the child. Surveys and 24-hour dietary recalls were collected at lessons one, six and nine. In addition, at lesson six and nine participants commented on the lesson format, what they learned and what they are now doing differently. Trained nutritionists (Heather Harvey MHS and Gayle Coleman MS, RD, Nutrition Program Specialists) administered the 24-hour recalls to participants at the commencement of the lessons.

Final evaluations were collected in February 2006. Coleman and Harvey collected feedback from educators after each lesson, through observation of lessons, individual conversations, as well as group discussions.

At the conclusion of the lesson series, participants showed increases in their knowledge of age appropriate feeding practices. They also showed increased confidence in their ability to get their child to try new foods and vegetables, and to drink water instead of sweetened beverages. Diet recalls indicated that the TV was off more often during meals and that there was a trend towards children eating more fruit. These changes indicate an improvement in feeding practices that will lead to healthier children and lower rates of overweight in children.

Participants' response to *Raising Healthy Eaters* was overwhelmingly positive. When asked what they do differently now, just over half responded with a statement related to healthy eating, such as increasing the variety of foods eaten, trying new foods, serving more age-appropriate portion sizes, or choosing healthier foods. Other self-reported behavior changes involved menu planning, the parent's role in mealtimes and the child's role in mealtimes. All participants would recommend *Raising Healthy Eaters* to a friend.

Since the initial introduction of the curriculum, further statewide training of UW-Extension educators has occurred. Plans are underway to offer the learner-centered program in at least 15 additional counties. Adaptation for a Latino audience and additional evaluation and follow up are underway.

Contact

Gayle Coleman RD, MS
Nutrition Program Specialist
Family Living Programs
University of Wisconsin-Extension
608-265-4975
gayle.coleman@uwex.edu