

IDEAS FOR INVOLVING PARENTS IN YOUTH NUTRITION EDUCATION

Many factors influence a person's food choices and eating behaviors. According to the Social Learning Theory¹, human behavior is explained by the interaction of personal factors, environmental influences and behavior. Parents are a significant part of their children's environment and therefore play a role in the development of their children's behaviors. They serve as role models for children, share their attitudes and knowledge about foods with children, and help children learn skills such as how to feed themselves. Therefore, involving parents in education for youth can reinforce and strengthen the impact of this education.

Following are ideas for involving parents in youth education. These ideas are based on suggestions provided by staff attending the WNEP fall 2005 conference and suggestions by the WNEP youth work group.

The first set of ideas directly involves parents. That is, the educator connects directly to the parents and has the opportunity to talk with them. These approaches give educators opportunities to find out what information from lessons children are sharing with their parents, what changes children might have made as a result of lessons, and/or things that parents might be interested in. They also give educators the chance to provide information and resources to parents, and encourage parents to participate in WNEP opportunities for adults. The second set of ideas indirectly involves parents. That is, educators might be providing information or encouraging parents to work with their children on assignments, but are unlikely to talk to the parents. Educators might be able to get feedback from parents when parents return short surveys or children share their parents' involvement in projects.

Ideas for directly involving parents in youth education

- Provide a manned display, possibly with a tasting activity, featuring nutrition information for parents at a school's open house/curriculum night/PTO meetings/similar times. Engage adults in discussion of what their children are being taught about nutrition and encourage them to sign up for WNEP classes for adults.
- Invite parents to their children's "graduations" from nutrition lessons and provide a short nutrition education component for parents at the graduations. For example, offer tasting of a recipe that might have been featured during the children's classes, show parents how to make it and discuss related nutrition information. Then encourage adults to sign up for WNEP classes for adults at these graduations.
- Involve parents in classroom activities and projects such as gardening and food preparation.
- Offer lessons that involve adults and children learning together. For example, offer adult-child learning stations that include hands-on activities at parent/child activity nights or offer food preparation and nutrition classes that include parents and children.
- Involve parents in parallel lessons/ learning activities for parents. For example, if children are learning about vegetables and growing vegetable plants, there might be

classes for adults on how to freeze/preserve or prepare these vegetables and related nutrition and food safety information.

- Offer lessons/ learning activities such as preparation of different foods along with nutrition/food safety information for parents while children are in class or at a convenient time, and encourage parents to attend at least one session.

Ideas for indirectly involving parents in youth education

- Give students a homework assignment that involves parents. For older students, the assignment might be working with parents to answer questions related to labels on foods in their homes. Both the student and parent would have separate questions but could assist one another with answering. Both the student and parent sign the completed assignment. For younger students, have children do a scavenger hunt with their parents in a grocery store for foods from different food groups. The parent could put an X in the box when the child found the item and told the parent why the food was good to eat. This idea could be combined with indirect education such as giving parents fact sheets (that include how to choose/use/prepare, nutrition, recipe) on foods in the scavenger hunt.
- Circulate a book bag among students that would be taken home to share with parents. Encourage parents to read to children and do a simple activity such as watching a short video that provides nutrition education for the parent. Request feedback from parents to determine their level of involvement.
- Have children involve their family members in setting a physical activity goal (or child and parent might have somewhat different goals but both give support to one another to accomplish) such as planning to walk XX minutes on XX days, or turning the TV off during meals and eating together XX days.
- Have students create teams with their parents and have class competitions to see which teams reach goals they set for themselves related to healthy lifestyles (might be fruit/vegetable intake, physical activity).
- Have students set up work stations at school and encourage parents to attend so students can teach parents from these stations.
- Use technology to involve parents. For example, set up a scheduled chat room on nutrition topics for adults using your county Extension site. If other technology, such as local access or public television, is used to deliver nutrition education for WNEP, encourage parents of children to watch the shows and provide feedback.
- Send a flyer home with children at the beginning of the year to recruit their parents for WNEP lessons.
- Send newsletters, fact sheets, letters and/or recipes home to parents.
- Provide food, nutrition and physical activity information on school web sites or have a teaser that links to nutrition information on your county Extension web site.

- Set up displays or posters in school buildings, at sporting events or other school activities where parents will see them.
- Have students develop class books, take them home and read them to parents, and get written feedback from parents.
- Have students duplicate and explain an activity done in class with their parents. One example is the “Pleasure of a Kiss” activity from WIN the Rockies.
- Put a sticker on children that says “I tried it!” or “Ask me” and encourage them to show it to their parents and explain what the sticker means when asked.
- Include nutrition education on school menus, on menu backs or as an envelope stuffer with lunch account statements.
- Send parents a summary of what was taught to children and encourage them to return a completed survey of what behavior changes they might have noticed in their children since being involved in these lessons.

¹Theory at a Glance. National Institutes of Health, 2001.
<http://www.cancer.gov/aboutnci/oc/theory-at-a-glance/>

February 2005