

SUCCESS STORIES

Cooking Program with Teenagers in Low-Income Communities in Georgia

SUMMARY

Cooking 101 is a program designed to teach school aged children and teenagers who come from low-income homes how to cook healthy meals that are also affordable a 6-week long program for teenagers taught by an instructor who led the classes in hands on cooking of a healthy meal. Participants were given the recipe and ingredients from the meal prepared in class to practice applying what they learned at home. The classes focus on teaching participants about cooking techniques, grocery shopping, food budgeting and nutrition. This program helps prepare teenagers for independence by giving them the knowledge and tools to be able to prepare healthy meals on their own. It is important to target teenagers because forming healthy eating habits during these years will increase the likelihood of continuing to make healthy food choices into adulthood.



CHALLENGE

According to ScienceDaily, there is a link between low income and obesity rates. The majority of the counties in East Georgia face the challenges of a high prevalence of families living with low-incomes and high rates of obesity. This program is intended to encourage cancer preventative behaviors and choices as evidence linking diet with cancer continues to be published. According to the American Cancer Society, one of the most important modifiable factors of cancer risk are weight control and dietary choices. One third of cancer deaths in the US can be attributed to diet and physical activity habits, including overweight and obesity. Maintaining a healthy weight and consuming a healthy diet can significantly reduce one's risk of developing or dying from cancer.

The communities of east Georgia face the challenge of unhealthy food habits. An informal needs assessment of local organizations in the area revealed that healthy food options are immediately rejected by teenagers because they are unfamiliar with the food items. It was difficult to gain participants for the classes. We found that low-income members of the community had the perception that nutritious meals, even if they are labeled as budget friendly, are still out of reach for them. We also found that there is a misconception that eating healthy means you cannot eat anything you want or only includes eating vegetables or tasteless foods.

WHAT DID YOU THINK OF COOKING 101?

“Kinsley really enjoyed the cooking class. She has been making us stuff from her recipes. Yesterday was her dad's birthday and she made him the apple crisp. It was very good!”

-Kinsley's Mom

“The Cooking Matters classes this week were fantastic! All the participants and their parents were happy to receive the ingredients each day but really excited about the gift cards. Thank you so much for delivering this quality program. Thank you to the amazing volunteers that gave of their time and effort to help teach the 4-H'ers about healthy meal prep as well as making good recipes.”

**-Leigh Anne Aaron
(Instructor)**

SOLUTION

The Cooking 101 Program helped school aged children and teenagers form positive associations with healthy foods by showing them how to modify their favorite meals with healthy alternatives. Through hands on experience and the ability for the participants to taste the food, we have shown them that healthy food does not have to be bland. By choosing low-cost meals to prepare, we have shown them eating healthy does not have to be expensive. The programs showed them how to use the food and ingredients they already have at home to make a healthy delicious meal by just preparing it a different way.

RESULTS

Cooking 101 is based off an evidence-based program called “Cooking Matters” which resulted in an increase of how often graduates chose healthy food for snacks, make meals or snacks with at least three food groups, eating more fruit, and eating breakfast within two hours of waking up. Our program’s goal was to increase the knowledge of cooking and nutrition. The change in knowledge was measured by comparing pre-test scores from the first day of class to the post test scores from the last day of class. Data analysis shows there was up to a 30% gain in knowledge in areas of cooking and nutrition throughout the 6-week course. The program has helped teens realize that healthy foods can be enjoyable and attainable even on a low budget.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Cooking 101 will continue to be offered in community and school settings. The program has been requested for a variety of audiences including churches, after school programs, and farmers’ markets. The program has been and will continue to be adapted to the needs of the audiences and locations requesting the program.