

Modeling Good Eating



Supporting Nutrition Education After the Lesson

In the area of diet, food choices and eating patterns are directly influenced by the people around us. The resemblances of good choices within the family are significantly greater than between family members and their friends. On the other hand, family members and others who live together may not all like or want to eat the same foods. Thus, there is a need to negotiate with the family or others about what to buy or to eat. Many nutrition education programs in schools have focused on family involvement as a way to work with existing social networks to make them more supportive of health. Although youth frequently eat outside the home, they still eat many of their meals with the family, particularly when they are younger. Surveys show that about three quarters of those aged 12 to 14 still eat five meals a week with their families, declining to about 60% for those aged 15 to 16, and about 40% for those aged 17 to 19 (Council of Economic Advisers, 2000). Another study found that the similarity between food choices of teens and their parents was 76% to 87% depending on the food, whereas between teens and their peers it was 19% (Feunekes et al., 1998). Thus family eating patterns are very important and can be addressed by nutrition education. However, nutrition educators often find that parents are busy and cannot attend regular classes designed for them.

Likewise, newsletters alone sent home have not been found to be effective (Contento, 2007). Therefore, here are a few ideas that have been found to be more effective. In each example, the parents were considered a new audience targeted directly for intervention.

In one program involving third graders and their families, in-school lessons alone and in-school-plus-family interventions were compared (Edmundson et al., 1996). Packets containing games and activities that required parental or adult involvement to complete were sent home to families each week for five weeks. Rewards were given for completed lessons that were returned. There were also two family fun nights. Results showed that there was a greater improvement in choices for lower-fat and lower-sodium foods for those who had the additional family programs. The family component of a different study, this time with middle school students, consisted of three newsletters and a set of 10 behavioral coupons with simple messages such as AServe a fruit or vegetable with dinner tonight@ (Lytle et al., 2004). About 30% of parents completed at least one set of behavioral coupons.

A more intense family component was Family Fun Nights in which families actually came together over a meal for a food-and-game experience (Harrington et al., 2005). Each of the seven sessions offered a game, new recipe choices, intervention messages to parents, a children=s fun page that reinforced program themes, optional conversation topics, and menu suggestions.

(Nutrition Education: Linking Research, Theory, and Practice. Contento, Isobel R. 2007. pp 150-151.)

Programs for Low-Literacy Audiences

In the United States, the average reading level is eighth grade, with about one in five reading at the fifth-grade level. Those with low literacy skills may not be able to read the handouts or booklets we give them or the written food and nutrition instructions we provide them. Doak and colleagues (1996) point out that we cannot identify low-literacy individuals by their appearance or by conversation with them. They are often very good in other forms of communication and have learned to compensate so that their lack of literacy skills is not obvious. They can be poor or affluent, immigrant or native born. Sometimes those who have low literacy in English are highly literate in the language of their country of origin; others, born in this country, just never developed the skills. Low in literacy skills does not mean low in intelligence. Our nutrition education can be effective if we find the appropriate format.

Comprehension is about grasping the meaning of instruction and is an important part of literacy. Comprehension requires that we pay attention to information and remember it for when we need it. Gaining the attention of the intended audience at the beginning of a session or a piece of printed information is important for activating the memory system. This can be done by vivid stories, striking visuals, or dramatic data. Getting the information into our audience's short-term memory requires us to be aware that this form of memory has a limited capacity and short storage time. We can usually store only up to seven independent items at a time. Any more than that may mean that we will not remember any of the items. For those of low literacy, the number is more like three to five. Transfer from short-term to long-term memory, and storage in long-term memory, requires that the new information links to what the audience already knows, is repeated often, and actively involves the audience.

How shall we apply these considerations to delivering nutrition education low-literacy audiences?

Here are some key strategies to remember:

- Know your audience.
- Pretest all your materials.
- Limit the number of educational objectives.
- Focus the content on behaviors or actions rather than on facts and principles to facilitate the ability to take action.
- Present information using a variety of ways to enhance learning.
- Use familiar examples and a conversational style.
- Actively engage your audience.
- Frequently repeat and review.
- Treat people with respect and dignity regardless of their literacy level, and of course, regardless of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, religion, or country of origin.

When preparing written materials:

- Write the way you speak; use the active voice.
- Use common words for you audience.
- Use short sentences.
- Put the key information first.
- Create headings, subheadings, and summaries.
- Use layout and typography that makes the text easier to read.

When preparing illustrations, charts, lists, tables, and graphs:

- Use visuals to enhance learning.
- Use visuals to enhance motivation.
- Include visuals to clarify the text, but use visuals carefully.
- Use simple and clear illustrations.
- Use color appropriately.

(Nutrition Education: Linking Research, Theory, and Practice. Contento, Isobel R. 2007. pp 458-462.)

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