

EFNEP SUCCESS STORIES

2015 NC Cooperative Extension McDowell County

Third Graders and Their Teacher Learn Portion Control

The portion sizes Americans eat on a daily basis are a contributing factor to the rising rates of overweight and obesity. Not only are large portions of food being eaten at home, but it has become very popular for restaurants to serve platefuls of food implying more “bang for your buck” and fast food establishments to encourage consumers to “value size” their meals.

In an effort to combat the mindset that bigger is better, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) in McDowell County partners with local elementary schools to help children become more cognizant of MyPlate’s serving size guidelines. EFNEP recently taught a lesson to third graders in which MyPlate’s recommended serving sizes were compared to the portion sizes children typically helped themselves to at each meal. The number of calories found in each scenario were calculated and then compared.

During the lesson, children also compared serving sizes and the number of calories found in common snack foods to portions they typically ate. Children participated in a hands-on food tasting experience in which they were offered a variety of healthy snack foods packaged in serving-sized plastic bags. They learned that by prepackaging their snacks in appropriate serving-size amounts, they would reduce the excessive calorie intake of mindless eating.

Lastly, EFNEP familiarized the children with the calories and SoFAs (solid fats and added sugars), found in some of their favorite “value-sized” fast food meal choices. The students were shocked when they learned the number of empty calories they were consuming when eating at fast food restaurants! With help from EFNEP, they discussed various ways to cut back on the amount of calories consumed when eating fast food was their only option.

Considering the children’s reaction and their parents’ positive feedback, EFNEP is confident this lesson has made an impact on the class. What was most surprising, however, was the impact the lesson made on the teacher. She confessed she’d struggled with her weight for years and was recently diagnosed as pre-diabetic. She’d tried several fad diets, but had not been successful in losing weight. After hearing EFNEP’s portion control lesson, she realized that a large part of her weight problem was because she was eating “portions”, not “servings” at each meal. Armed with the information gleaned from EFNEP, she began controlling her food and calorie intake. She even motivated her teenage daughter to become more cognizant of controlling her portion sizes.

By the end of the EFNEP series, the teacher and her daughter had both lost weight. Not only had EFNEP’s portion size lesson taught the third graders healthy behaviors, it had also greatly impacted the eating behaviors of their teacher and her family. The teacher also shared that losing weight had made her feel better and given her more energy than she’d had in years! She was confident she would benefit from that extra energy... and knew her third graders would as well!



EFNEP in One First Grade Class Makes Change in Entire School

USDA’s MyPlate recommends that school-aged children eat 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Unfortunately, a 2009 survey taken by the Child Health Assessment and Monitoring Program (CHAMP), reported that in North Carolina only one in four children between the ages of 1–17 years are meeting MyPlate’s serving recommendation. Remove fruit juice as a serving option and that number increases to 73%. Research has shown that the concern over such poor intake is that as children grow older, their fruit and vegetable intake typically decreases and poor eating habits practiced when young can linger or worsen into adolescence and adulthood.

For this reason, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) in McDowell County teaches local elementary school-aged children the importance of eating 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Administered by North Carolina Cooperative Extension, EFNEP uses hands-on activities and creative food preparation activities when working with the children in their classrooms to encourage healthy eating behaviors. Last fall, the EFNEP program assistant took advantage of Halloween’s approach to persuade a class of first graders to be more mindful of their fruit and vegetable intake. After learning the importance of eating 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day, the children discussed creative ways to incorporate more of these healthy foods into their diets.

At their next lesson, the children excitedly told the EFNEP program assistant about the healthy snack Halloween party they had planned. Putting their ideas into action, the children decided that instead of serving empty calorie cupcakes, they would serve nutrient-rich fruit cups at their Halloween party! But that wasn’t all! Because they had challenged other classrooms to have a Healthy Halloween Party, all classrooms at the school would be serving fruit and vegetable treats at their Halloween parties as well!

The program assistant was astonished to think that EFNEP, through one first grade class, could have made such a positive change in the eating behaviors of an entire school. Upon learning the importance of meeting MyPlate’s recommended intakes, the children had demonstrated their ability to substitute nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables for the empty calories found in high fat and sugary snacks. According to the research, being more mindful of choosing healthy foods at such an early age would encourage the children to maintain good eating habits and reduce the risk of experiencing poor health as they grow older.

References:

Child Health Assessment and Monitoring Program (CHAMP). Fruit and Vegetable Consumption Among Children. Retrieved at http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pdfs/EnjoyMoreFandV_School_Age.pdf on January 26, 2015.

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