



Does Hands-On Cooking Instruction Before Adulthood Support Healthy Food Behaviors to Become Lifestyle Choices?

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This study explores the potential for hands-on, cooking education with adolescents to result in healthy lifestyle choices. Lasting behavior change is the ultimate goal of effective nutrition education, yet few programs aspire beyond attitudinal and knowledge changes. Hands-on education can go further to support shifts towards healthy behaviors.

The research

In 2016, the FamilyCook Productions partnered with the Tisch Food Center to explore the potential for a sustained effect from hands-on nutrition education. Thirty alumni of FamilyCook's Teen Battle Chef (TBC) program were recruited and they were interviewed from July 2016 to July 2017. We hypothesized that the most influential program components in driving lasting behavior change would be: 1) culinary skill development; 2) influence of students' social networks; and 3) being pushed out of their comfort zone and challenged. Participants ranged from one to seven years post program, with more than half being 2 – 4 years since program participation.

Key findings

Teen Battle Chef's hands-on program design resulted in 74% of the program participants achieving a healthy weight. Also, 77% adopted at least 4 out of 6 behaviors in line with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans targeted by the program.

- There was a statistically significant drop in weight among youth post-program.
- At baseline (pre-program), 45% of youth were overweight or obese (BMI >25). At the time of their interview, which for some was as many as 7 years post program, the percent of alumni who were overweight or obese dropped to 26% - lower than the national average.
- 77% of alumni reported that they followed at least 4 of the 6 behaviors in line with the Dietary Guidelines most critical for adolescents (i.e. eat fruits daily; eat vegetables daily; drink water over sugary drinks; refrain from junk food; eat breakfast regularly; exercise multiple times per week).
- TBC alumni ranked the following program outcomes as being most impactful on their behavior: 1) Enhanced peer influence and a positive social environment; 2) acquired hands-on skills; 3) increased food and nutrition knowledge; and 4) pushed out of their comfort zone to try new foods, make verbal presentations, etc.
- 90% of alumni reported they positively influenced the food behaviors of their family and/or friends.

“[E]veryone in Teen Battle Chef... inspired me... every class we went to, inspired me to eat healthy... to ... change my life and... lifestyle, especially when I just got out of high school.”

“I've been able to... sustain a life, and go to school, and, you know, pursue being a more well-rounded person.”

Research in partnership with

