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THE WHAT'S, WHERE'S, AND WHY'S OF WHAT YOUR FAMILY EATS: THE BURLINGTON CHILDREN'S SPACE FARM TO TABLE PROGRAM



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Introduction

Preventing childhood obesity is a national priority, and changing dietary behavior in both children and adults is challenging. Burlington Children's Space, Inc. (BCS), a private, non-profit early education and childcare center providing services for families in the Burlington area, is trying to do just that. The Farm to Table Project was designed to positively influence the food choices of students and their families as well as to cultivate a relationship between families and local farmers. In an effort to secure expanded funding for the school's food program, BCS requested that we assess the effectiveness of their Food Program.

Methods

Survey Design: 17 question survey was designed to assess the eating habits and behaviors of the families of the children who were enrolled in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Food Program or "farm to table" style program.

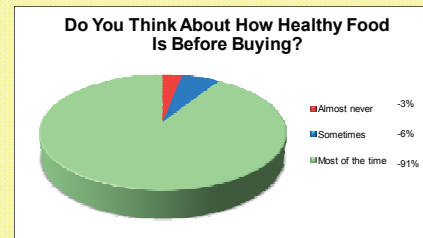
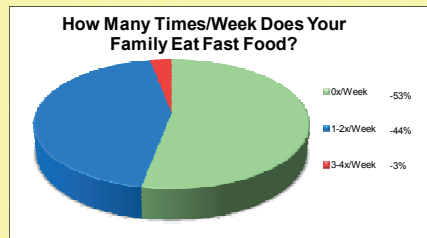
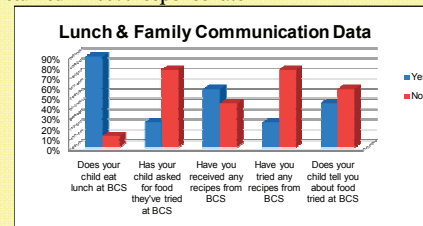
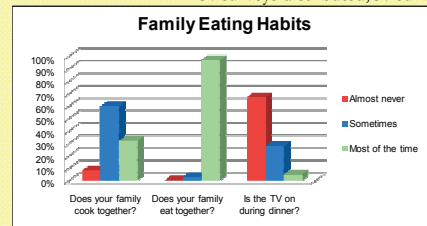
Data was collected by administering the survey on site to the parents of children who were enrolled in our garden/playground project called: "the garden belongs to the children." (n=37).

A follow up interview was conducted with a volunteer subgroup (n=15) of the survey participants, using open-ended questions, over dinner prepared and served at BCS.



Results

37 surveys distributed; 37 surveys returned – 100% response rate



Discussion

- BCS's Farm to Table Program seems to be having a positive impact on nutrition and food choices of students.
- Comparing our results with a recent study on the eating habits of U.S. families and children, the families surveyed appear to have relatively healthy eating habits, as evidenced by the fact that 53% of BCS families surveyed never eat fast food compared to the national average of 18% (Ref 2). In addition, 91% of BCS parents responded that they consider healthiness of a food before purchasing most of the time. In comparison, a study by Higginson *et al* indicated that their study participants only looked at nutrition labels on 4.2% of occasions while grocery shopping (Ref 3).
- More families (21; n=37) are receiving healthy food ideas from BCS than cited in a June 2009 survey (17; n=35). However, several (14) families still note not having received ideas but express interest in receiving recipes.
- Children often do not talk to their parents about what they ate at school. These results may be explained in part by the children's limited language skills and a tendency for children to misplace paper communications from BCS. Additionally, the routine nature of the Farm to Table lunch program may contribute to the lack of communication between students and their families.
- BCS families sincerely appreciate the Farm to Table Program and recognize its beneficial effect on their children's eating habits. One parent noted "[BCS lunches] expose the children to new foods they don't normally eat at home". Another parent said that the "Program helps to destigmatize the lunchtime experience and allows the kids to feel more comfortable trying new foods".
- The parent interviews at the dinner helped us to form recommendations for continuing to develop the Farm to Table Program (see Recommendations section).

Recommendations

- Posting brightly colored flyers on bulletin boards by the entrance to the school to improve communication between BCS and families regarding the Farm to Table Program
- Including healthy recipes in BCS's lunch menu calendar to increase the number of families who try the recipes at home
- Providing the families with samples of the different foods prepared that week
- Compiling a BCS community cookbook of recipes contributed by the parents and staff
- Utilizing more ingredients from local sources or farms for meals
- Organizing "family dinner nights" hosted by BCS to highlight the Farm to Table program
- Publishing a year book including pictures of the children and their favorite recipes

The Farm to Table program is showing promise in its ability to influence the eating habits of young children. The program has not only enriched the lives of the children in the program but has also benefitted the parents by saving them time and giving them peace of mind. Future directions of this project could be aimed at improving the eating habits of the entire family.



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