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Sensational SuperCupboards

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Sensational SuperCupboards

Abstract

While the nation's investment in nutrition assistance is an important and effective tool in fighting hunger and food insecurity, improving the diet quality of low-income Americans remains a major challenge. The SuperCupboard program is a successful community-based approach for educating low-income adults with families, thereby enabling them to prepare and consume healthy, nutritious, and safe diets and to become better managers of their food dollars.

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Introduction

When families cannot meet the costs of living, access to enough nutritious, safe, and acceptable food is difficult. Food intake has a significant impact on health, quality of life, and longevity. Within Cooperative Extension, nutrition education has been a key strategy for changing behavior in order to reach health goals. Several research study findings also show that low-income participants can improve food buying, meal planning, and preparation and food safety practices (Amstutz & Dixon, 1986; Brink & Sobal, 1994; DelTredici, Omelich, & Laughlin, 1988).

Project Description

The SuperCupboard model is an innovative educational approach to reach low-income families. The first SuperCupboard was a collaborative effort, started by Sister Rose MacDermott at the Bernadine Center in Delaware County, Pennsylvania and Alberta Bannister, a 30-year EFNEP nutrition advisor (Chester County). The idea was to target frequent users of emergency food services. Today, a SuperCupboard is a series of six-to-eight classes designed to teach nutrition, food preparation, food safety, food resource management, and basic life skills.

Goals of a SuperCupboard

The overall goal is to enable low-income participants to prepare and consume healthy foods and to

learn to manage their food dollars wisely.

Each participant is challenged to:

- a. Add at least three nutrient dense foods to their diet,
- b. Evaluate their daily food intake using the food guide pyramid,
- c. Meet the minimal number of servings recommended by the food guide pyramid,
- d. Decrease the number of times they run out of food at the end of the month,
- e. Increase their ability to prepare a meal from foods they have on hand, and
- f. Improve food storage, food handling, and sanitation in the home.

Improved eating behaviors are not the only outcomes of the SuperCupboard. The program helps the low-income family to break the cycle of dependency, low self-esteem, and diminished self-reliance. The program differs from the traditional EFNEP program in four ways:

1. The SuperCupboard program coordinates community resources such as child care, transportation, and other services so participants can focus and share ideas with others in a workshop setting;
2. Preparation of an entire meal is emphasized;
3. Participants usually take home a bag of supplies and food in order to replicate the meal at home; and
4. The SuperCupboard curriculum includes a life skill component in addition to nutrition education.

Because the SuperCupboard is based on community needs and funded from a variety of private and public sources, no two SuperCupboards are alike.

Evaluation

Findings of two major studies show the value of this community-based program.

In 1995, 47 SuperCupboard participants in six sites in Pennsylvania completed a 40-item pre- and post-test that addressed three outcomes: locus of control, attitude about meal preparation and positive feelings about self (Haines, Heald, & Sigman-Grant, 1995). About half (41%) of the participants showed a positive change in locus of control following their SuperCupboard participation. One third reported an increase in nutritious food behavior as measured by changes in food behavior data and a 24-hour food recall. Those reporting a positive attitude about meal preparation had significantly higher nutrition behavior scores, and participation in the program was shown to have a positive effect on attitudes toward meal preparation.

In 2000, 2,119 individuals (representing 616 families) were reached through Pennsylvania SuperCupboard programs. Demographically, black and white adults participated in equal numbers, and American Indian, Hispanic, and Asian people were also represented. Over 10% of the participants were male, 10% of the women were pregnant or nursing, and most had children. Almost half of the participants were less than 50% below the poverty level and more than half lived in a city of 50,000 or more residents.

The 2000 study findings showed an 89% positive change in one or more of the food guide pyramid food groups. Participants also showed significant improvement in food-related behaviors:

- 58% improved one or more practices in foods safety;
- 66% improved nutrition practices; and
- 72% improved food resource management practices.

Starting and Managing a SuperCupboard

Though participant changes was positive, SuperCupboard coordinators often indicate that there are challenges in creating and maintaining a working SuperCupboard. Most Extension educators agree that a good rapport with community agencies and programs serving low-income audiences is essential. The base of community leadership must be broad enough to encompass all the services needed. Neighborhood centers, Salvation Army, faith communities, food banks, and soup kitchens are often cited as being critical agency collaborators. Having a main goal that can be communicated and a way of evaluating the effort are important next steps. Start-up resources are often cited as crucial, yet once the program demonstrates success, future funding seems less of a

problem. Childcare issues, including sitters, location, and liability insurance continues to remain a challenge.

A handbook, *SuperCupboards: Breaking the Cycle of Dependency* (1996), has assisted coordinators in developing new SuperCupboard programs. The manual outlines steps to assess needs, identify community resources, and evaluate programs. Sample schedules, menus, and curriculum topics are also provided in this handbook. This handbook is available by contacting Cathy Harrington at <charrington@psu.edu>

Conclusion

For over 14 years, the SuperCupboard program has helped participants improve dietary practices and to manage their food dollars. There are currently 35 SuperCupboard programs in Pennsylvania, with additional ones being initiated through EFNEP and the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP) each year in Pennsylvania and other states. Some are called by other names, such as Super Pantries, but regardless of the name, this is a successful approach to increase food security and improve the nutritional health of low-income individuals and families.

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