

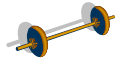


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TEACHING OUR CHILDREN BASIC NUTRITION AND EXERCISE USING COLORS TO KEEP IT SIMPLE



2004



By Steve Courson



This summer I had the privilege of working with two Head Start classes of 3-5 year olds in an effort to teach the children basic nutrition and exercise. This was done in cooperation and in conjunction with the classroom staff at two different sites. The first site was at the Nemaocolin complex on the mountain, and the second site was in Uniontown at North Union on Coolspring Road. Previously, I had no experience in teaching basic nutrition and exercise to such a young age group. This was a totally experimental exercise in learning what could be accomplished and also an educational process for me as the instructor. To say the least, it was both challenging and enjoyable. The goals were relatively simple but the expectations, as with any pilot project, were totally unclear and subject to evaluation.



I spent approximately 30 minutes with each class on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for approximately one month. The children seemed responsive to me as a male "role model"; however, being a former football player, I was concerned that they would be intimidated by my physical size. The teaching process would be hindered if the children could not relate to a man my size. At first, this was a personal concern.



Each session consisted of teaching the value and identification of various common dietary fruits and vegetables. Eventually, we even started

to teach the children the difference between starches and protein sources. The teaching process involved using three dimensional plastic imitation fruits and vegetables and/or two dimension pictures for their identification learning phase. Later, the assisting Head Start educators would include snack trays with the various fruits and vegetables for the youngsters to sample and to encourage healthy snacking habits. The children were also instructed to the health benefits of why they should make healthy choices.

The teaching method we employed was based on making the instructional sessions informal and fun as I attempted to make everything a "game". Repetition of the nutritional information was vital in getting the children to understand clearly what they were being taught. However, whether it be coaching sports or learning anything, repetition is key in young minds retaining the information. For the 3-5 age group simulating games and positive reinforcement was also tantamount in their educational progress. The critical factor most important was the interaction of their teachers in keeping the children involved and thinking about their food choices which was accomplished by using colors and an "in house" chart that also encouraged the children's participation in evaluating their "in school" meals.



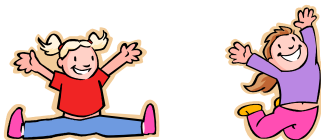
Charting their fruit and vegetable consumption was done on a "Yummy Colors" poster board that consisted of the days of the week on the vertical column and the various colors of fruits and vegetables on the horizontal column. The children would use little stickers to designate their healthy

food decisions. The chart was essentially a large and visual reinforcement tool in the classroom.

The fruits and vegetables were color classified: orange, purple, yellow, white, green and red. The children were encouraged to make their choices of the healthy colors.

Yummy Colors

The fitness portion of the class was composed of mostly basic stretching movements and some simple age appropriate exercises such as leg lifts for the abdominal region, introductory push-ups and Roman chairs against the wall. I participated as the instructor and exercise model and kept the sessions light in intensity both physically and mentally. Again, the emphasis was placed on fun to encourage the children to enjoy exercise. We also engaged the children in games such as relays, hopping, skipping and basically encouraging them to move. Positive reinforcement was the mentality and motivational method employed by myself and supporting staff. The children seemed to enjoy and look forward to the sessions.



It is difficult to gauge how much the children retained from such a short period of indoctrination into basic nutrition and exercise. On the short-term, I was both surprised and impressed in how much they seemed to learn over a relatively small period of time. I am sure positive reinforcement from Head Start staff played a critical role in the children's advancements. I would also anticipate that if done on a daily basis over the course of the school year, the prospects of what they could retain would be to most somewhat surprising. The building of an exercise and nutritional foundation at a young age could have a dramatic impact on our nation's battle against societal obesity and healthy living standards. The influence the children could have on their parents and families could also have a distinct cultural benefit. Implementing this teaching model in other Head Start programs in outside communities would not present any noted major operational difficulties.

One added note is the appreciable benefit of families doing some of this on their own in the environment of the home. This is something that could be easily replicated and again emphasis on fun would be a priority. There are many family activities such as walks, biking and outdoor games that would be of physical well being for the entire group. When families pay greater attention to food groups and healthy choices, everyone gains a little. Changes could start with healthy snacks, and wholesale differences in a healthier overall diet can be implemented gradually. Support in the home is the best possible scenario for healthier living.



In summary, both Head Start educators and I witnessed that young children were interested and were able to learn much about basic exercise and nutrition in a relatively short period of time. They seemed to grasp the basics and most were responsive to exercising when it was made fun and there was much positive reinforcement. How much they were able to impart at home is unclear, but a program such as this over the long term could better evaluate that factor. Ultimately, it was positive experience for me, the instructor, and I believe has further potential yet to be developed that could greatly benefit an entire generation of children.



My comments are based on personal experiences. I am not a licensed dietician or physician and do not speak for Head Start or any other organization. Any specific comments or questions about what may be beneficial for any individual should be directed to a physician, nurse or licensed dietician.

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