

# Importance of Nutrition Education in Elementary Schools: From K to 5

## AND THE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM UPDATE

#gohealthnyc  
#spoonsacrossamerica

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### Nutrition Education Newsletter

In the United States, childhood obesity is increasing in alarming rates. The percentage of children and adolescents affected by obesity has more than tripled in the last fifty years. Data from 2015 – 2016 show that nearly 1 in 5 school age children and young people in the US are obese<sup>1</sup>.

This high incidence may be due to factors like genetics, demographics, lack of sleep (which creates stress), excessive energy intake and lack of physical activity. Another driving issue may be the fact that many children and young adults lack the proper nutrition education to choose healthy and nutritious foods. This happens especially in areas where there is no access to fresh foods, AKA food deserts, where majority of choices that can be found are fast foods and processed snacks full of empty calories, sugar, sodium and zero nutritional value.



### How do we know when it is the right age to start instructing our younger generations what to eat?

According to Birch, Savage & Ventura<sup>2</sup>, in their article on development of children's eating behaviors, breast feeding and parental guidance through the toddler years, are of great significance when setting eating behaviors patterns. Which also means that, open mindedness to food choices in children, can come from learning from the actions of their caretakers. If a child hears or sees that a certain fruit or vegetable is undesirable by an elder, that child may be more resistant to try it; consequently, growing up with a negative concept, without ever even tasting it.



*Samara Community School Garden, Bronx, NY*

This is when positive reinforcement in school nutrition programs and school lunches come into

place.

The reintroduction of previously rejected ingredients, combined with sensory learning of sound, sight, smell, touch and taste, can encourage the school setting to

<sup>1</sup> Overweight and Obesity (2018). Childhood Obesity Facts. CDC. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

<sup>2</sup> Birch, L., Savage, J. & Ventura, A. (2007). Influences on the Development of Children from Infancy to Adolescence. *Canadian J Diet Pract. Res.* Vol 68 (1), s1-s56

promote healthy eating<sup>3</sup>. This works particularly well when trying to minimize or eliminate the consumption of junk food and drinks, replacing them with consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Some school programs are also educating children on the provenance of food, so they can learn that plants, vegetables and fruits come from a seed, and not the supermarket. They achieve this by building intramural gardens and urban farms, where children are active participants, as they play the role of urban farmers and seeing the process from seed to fruit; and they reinforced this by making trips to the nearest farmer's market.

Another layer of this model is children participation in cooking classes, as early as five years of age, where they get introduced to the process on how to cook simple recipes, using seasonal fresh ingredients. This method creates a ripple effect, because it is a gateway into the household. It goes like this: Child at school, executes and tastes a new ingredient, that child goes back home and requests to their caretakers to try and make it at home. Most times, it becomes a sharing point of the family meal, changing dynamics; because it will encourage the parents to taste the ingredient, making them to be open to new foods.

Many of these programs are sponsored by federal grants under the USDA and the Farm Bill, this bill is updated every five years, the most recent changes this year of 2018. Programs such as SNAP and SNAP Ed are part of this bill, and they depend on sub-grantees to run school nutrition education programs, and advocacy groups for children health rights in school lunch programs across the country.

These healthy school lunch programs were part of Michelle Obama's nutrition campaign for children during President Barack Obama's 2013 -2017 administration, as a responsive tool to mitigate malnutrition among children, clearly evidenced by the obesity rate and the chronic health issues of a generation, too early to be sick from processed foods that were being served in the school lunches prior to that period.

Mystery meat and pizza as a complete food group, were substituted with whole grain items, salad bars and physical activity to create healthy lifestyles.

For the last decade, in NYC, subgrantees such as Children's Aid Society, Harlem Children Zone and Spoons Across America have been providing nutrition education to children as early as two years of age. They run programs such as Go!Healthy, Spoons Food Explorers and Healthy Harlem, to provide relief to minority communities in disadvantaged areas and in zones where fresh food options are a challenge. These organizations depend on section IV of the Farm Bill, which support nutrition programs in general.

Nutrition education at an early age is important. It prevents obesity and high blood pressure; consequently, lowering the rates for child and adult diabetes and CVD, when nutrition education is provided in schools, combined with mental and physical exercise, creates a significant change of lifestyle, not only for the child, but also for the whole family.

**News Flash: On December 10, 2018, Mr. Sonny Perdue, Secretary of Agriculture, under president Trump, approved the new school lunch rule; consequently, reversing the current school lunch regulations, set by Ms. Obama. It is called Flexible School Meals<sup>4</sup>.**

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<sup>3</sup> Nekitsing, C., Hetherington, M., Blundell-Birtill, P. (2018). Developing healthy food preferences in preschool children through taste exposure, sensory learning and nutrition education. *Current Obesity Reports*. Vol 7, p.60-67

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, J. (2018, Dec.8) Trump administration rolls back Obama era rules for school lunches. *The New York Times*. p A19.