

Program: “What’s Cooking on the Central Coast With the Pink and Dude Chefs?”

Sponsor: California Polytechnic State University Kinesiology Department’s

Emerging Center of Obesity Prevention and Education (COPE)

Objective

The *Pink and Dude Chefs (P&D Chefs)* program was an after-school culinary intervention for middle school girls and boys, aged 12 to 14 years, in reduced-income Hispanic/Latino communities in San Luis Obispo County, California. Financial supporters partnered with California Polytechnic State University’s emerging Center for Obesity Prevention and Education in order to improve the program’s sustainability. *P&D Chefs* was designed to teach nutrition through the practical application of basic cooking skills.

Assessment of Needs

At the turn of the 20th century, time spent on meal preparation took an average of 40 hours per week. In the late 1900s, cooking skills transferred from the home to commercial preparers and required an average of 10 hours per week (French, Story, & Jeffery, 2001). Consequently, children perceive cooking skills as reading the instructions on a box as opposed to making meals from scratch (Lang & Caraher, 2001). Along with the increased consumption of convenience foods, body mass index (BMI) has also risen, suggesting a correlation between food choice and BMI (Carlson & Gerrior, 2006). Because the consumption of commercially prepared products was a speculated cause of obesity, this program provided practical cooking classes on diet quality as a method to reduce the prevalence of obesity in adolescents.

Program Strategy

P&D Chefs aimed to increase the participants’ self-efficacy for cooking and cooking healthfully:

- by providing a fun and safe environment conducive for cooperative learning;
- by building knowledge, skills and confidence for healthful dietary practices; and
- by encouraging youth to eat and experiment with healthy food items atypical of daily meal plans.

The *P&D Chefs* program established a network of local organizations and businesses to combat childhood obesity. During the development of the *P&D Chefs* program, the use of the social cognitive theory as the theoretical framework was considered ideal for this age group because interactive cooperative learning allowed students to gain confidence in the kitchen through repeated practice. The program was conducted over a 6-week term and included two instructional periods per week. The instructional period was composed of a 30-minute lecture and a 90-minute cooking practicum. Each lesson discussed basic nutrition while building culinary skills (e.g. knife skills, building balanced meals, understanding Nutrition Facts Panels on food labels, identifying portion sizes, etc.).

Evaluation Approach

To evaluate the effectiveness of the culinary program, pre- and post-questionnaires were administered. Questionnaires were developed using a validated assessment tool (Food Standards Agency, 2005). Throughout the cooking practicum, observations were made regarding appropriate hygiene and sanitation practices, proper cooking skills, and following recipe procedures. At the end of each 6-week session, focus groups were conducted by trained university facilitators using structured moderator scripts, which were developed with the intent of determining the impact of *P&D Chefs* on knowledge, efficacy expectations, and eating behaviors for future program modification.

Implications for Practitioners

Practical cooking class is a strategy to help teach nutrition through basic cooking skills. It can help the *P&D Chefs* plan a complete, balanced, and inexpensive meal for their family by incorporating seasonal fruits and vegetables and lean protein sources, including fish. The hands-on approach can also help youth gain leadership, social, and culinary skills. Lessons learned from the program suggested the importance of eliminating transportation issues by partnering with existing after-school programs (e.g. a middle school or YMCA facility), emphasizing “hands on learning” by incorporating interactive activities within the 30-minute lecture, providing lesson materials and communication through electronic means, and including co-ed classroom learning.

To implement this type of program in the community, cooperation with an established community foundation (e.g. YMCA, Bright Futures After School Program, etc.) was deemed necessary for greater acceptance, sustainability, and impact. Historically, family interaction in the kitchen was important as it developed the foundation of culinary skills, knowledge of a meal's components, and self-reliance (Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003; Lautenschlager & Smith, 2007; Stead et al., 2004; Verlegh & Candel, 1999). Today, one way to increase parental involvement would be to create a parent/child cooking class with a nutrition education component. Future projects will investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of parent/child cooking sessions.

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