

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Young children taste fresh, local vegetables through Farm to Early Care and Education

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension, in partnership with Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, advances nutrition and healthy lifestyle education at 10 early child care facilities in south central Idaho.

The Situation

Childhood obesity was named one of the five health priorities outlined by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's 2019 health assessment, *Get Healthy Idaho*, because 28% of Idaho children are considered overweight or obese. The rising prevalence of obesity among Idaho children concerns public health officials statewide. Idaho Department of Health and Welfare supports a variety of measures, including Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE), to prevent the early onset of obesity-related disease.

A 2017 meta-analysis of picky eating and food neophobia studies in young children found an inverse relationship between picky eating and “responsive feeding” practices such as monitoring children’s eating and setting structured family meals.

The preschool years are a formative time as children begin to develop their own taste preferences and model adult habits and behaviors. National farm to school research documents that early and effective interventions in childcare facilities are associated with children’s greater willingness to try fruits and vegetables at school and at home and increases children’s knowledge on healthy eating, gardening and agriculture.



Reaching for slices of locally grown fresh red bell pepper during a taste testing activity in Hailey, Idaho. Photo by A. Schweizer.

Our Response

The Farm to Early Care and Education pilot program was developed to help children and families in south-central Idaho establish healthy eating habits while supporting local farms. UI Extension implemented Farm to ECE curriculum and strategies at 10 IdahoS-TARS certified early care facilities in the South Central Public Health District between September 2019 and May 2020. Participating sites were in four counties across the health district including three sites in Blaine County, a site in Jerome County, five sites in Twin Falls County and a site in Cassia County.

The Farm to ECE pilot program engaged 383 children, aged 3 to 5 years old. The program recruited diverse child care settings, including preschools, child care

centers, family child care homes and K-12 school districts. Educators were asked to lead Farm to ECE lessons and activities three to four times a month in their classroom after receiving curriculum, materials, fresh produce and direction from Farm to ECE program coordinator.

The curriculum was structured each month around a featured “Harvest of the Month” food, typically a vegetable that was available seasonally in south-central Idaho. Each month followed a similar lesson pattern, commencing with a book read-aloud to introduce the featured food. Children tried the new food family-style, practiced new vocabulary, engaged in growing their own vegetable, acted out the life stages of the plant, and joined in physical games, dancing and activities. Children brought home stickers, posters, food samples and parent newsletters in English/Spanish.

The Farm to ECE program coordinator worked exclusively with local Idaho Preferred® growers and family owned businesses to procure the featured “Harvest of the Month” food. Children tried different seasonal vegetables and other healthy foods including bell peppers, beets, winter squash, potatoes, beans, oatmeal, salad greens and microgreens.

Program Outcomes

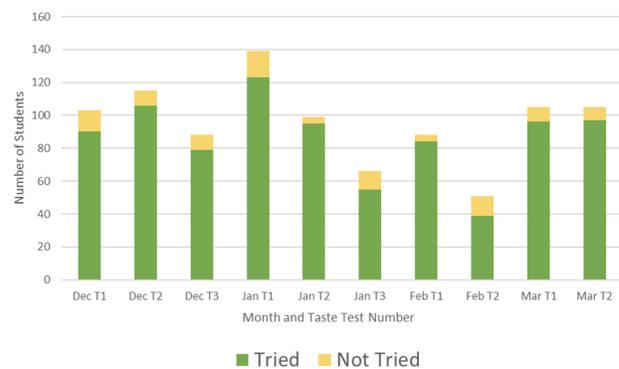
Children were encouraged to record their feelings about the new food on a taste test sheet. The taste tests were conducted anonymously with students who were present on the days of the tastings. Between December 2019 and March 2020, students rated their feelings by placing a sticker on a smiling face for “I like this,” a frowning face for “I don’t like this” or a questioning face for “I didn’t try this yet” to capture the number of students willing and not willing to try the new food.

Taste test data yielded encouraging results. Of the recorded taste tests (n=932), 836 tests indicated that the

student tried the food while only 96 tests indicated that the student did not try the food. Taste test data showed that on average 89.7% of children tasted the “Harvest of the Month” food during classroom tastings each month (Table 1). Whether or not they liked or disliked the food, the consistency of children trying food each month was high. This high participation rate may be attributed to weekly Farm to ECE intervention. Students were introduced to the “Harvest of the Month” food through visual representation, stories and activities one week prior to tasting the food family-style with their peers.

Establishing the early tradition of learning about the food prior to tasting the food a week later in a structured setting may help explain why the Farm to ECE program saw stable, yet high participation in taste test.

Table 1. A comparison of students who tried the “Harvest of the Month” food opposed to those who did not.



The Future

UI Extension and Idaho Department of Health and Welfare will continue to offer the Farm to ECE program through June 2021. The team will expand Farm to ECE by developing “Harvest of the Month” toolkits, highlighting a fresh Idaho fruit or vegetable, for 20 participating early care sites in south-central Idaho. The Farm to ECE team will also lead trainings accessible to IdahoSTARS certified providers across the state.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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