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ECE 210

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Nourishing Their Minds

Statement of the Problem

We send our children into school cafeterias where they are served lunch meals that fail to nourish their bodies and support their learning. In New York City, there is fast food all over the place. It's very hard for some people to buy nutritious food for their families. Some children go to school and get nutrition from their school meals. However, school lunches may seem healthy, but they are processed and don't appear appealing for children. These lunches fail to truly support their health, their academic performance and well-being.

These processed foods can lead to obesity and chronic health issues and our children later in life. The foods that we serve children as they are developing affect them across all domains of their development. It sets them up creating long-term habits for themselves. When processed food habits are formed as a child, it often will continue on into adulthood, which will increase lifelong risks for diseases. A high intake of processed foods by children has been linked to poor concentration and lower test scores. Many studies have found out that all the artificial additives that are present in food now are contributing to children's hyperactivity, mood swings, and behavior disorders. The food that is being given to our children is affecting them in the greatest ways that we don't even think of. Children are at school all day, and they are not being given the opportunity to eat nutritious food. Their body requires them to develop. I now work with three

year olds, and there were numerous children who have been diagnosed with ADHD and autism. Parents are calling, concerned because their doctor has recommended putting their three year-old on medication to calm their behaviors. However, their children are not eating proper nutritious food. So we always suggest changing a child's diet before they resort to that medication. There are many children being diagnosed with ADHD and other health issues at an early age.

Research Source Summaries

In school, children should learn about the nutrition they are supposed to have. When we don't teach children about proper nutrition, they should have to go through the world, almost blindsided from what they are being served and handed. If we are able to teach children the value of nutrition and how it affects them, I am sure that many children wouldn't recognize it's important and choose to eat nutritious food. According to the article, "Show 'n' Tell nutrition at school," Jeanna Incantalupo Kuhner raises the question: "What examples are we giving students if we serve them poor quality food, while we tell them to make better food choices?" (p 17).

What children see when they are served their school lunch contradicts what they would be learning in a classroom about nutrition. The school lunches are filled with processed food which actually doesn't have any benefit for the child.

Providing children with nutritious food at school does more than fill up their stomachs. It creates a foundation for their academic and lifelong healthy habits. In the article, it states, "Prioritizing health – demonstrated by what food is served in the school cafeteria and aligning it with nutrition instruction – is imperative for a societal shift against behaviors, resulting in obesity" (Kuhner 18). There is a disconnect from classrooms where they emphasize the importance of eating fresh foods, limiting sugar, and processed ingredients. Then the children go down to the cafeteria and our served trays filled with processed meats, and veggies that are filled

with chemicals in a can. The issue of children getting healthier foods in school had already been addressed before. According to the article, it argues that, “Sadly, the progress of healthy school food, promised in the 2010 CNA reform, was short-lived. In spring 2011, the house Appropriations Committee science for Agriculture Appropriation Act (2011), which directs the agriculture department to ditch the first new nutritional standards in the 15 years proposed for school, breakfasts and lunches because the lawmaker say meals containing more fruits and vegetables, whole greens and low fat dairy will cost an additional 7 billion over five years” (Kuhner 20). Even with the knowledge of how healthy foods can support our children, economic, and political pressures can still block or reverse the progress that was made. That also highlights the importance of how schools should advocate for a child’s health and take action on their own. Addressing the health risks for children requires more than just knowledge, it requires supportive environments, and consistency or where healthy behaviors are modeled, encouraged and sustained.

Not only does what a child eats affects their health, but it also affects their behaviors and focus in school and at home. When children consume diets that are high in processed snacks, sugary beverages, and fast food, they experience those energy spikes, and the crashes as well. The fluctuation in the energy of the food they are consuming, affects our ability to stay focused in class and engage with their peers and teachers. According to the article, “The Feeding of Great Children: The Impact of Nutrition on Learning,” Pamela Schmidle states, “more and more research is showing that excessive sugars, dyes, preservatives, and possibly even milk, and we products can affect activity level, attention, interactions, confidence, and sense of well-being, all factors that impact a child’s ability to learn” (p 20). Exposing our children to these types of foods at a young age, does not help them in their development. When a child is used to eating all

these additives and all these chemicals in their food, that is all that they are going to want to eat in their future. When they see some vegetables and some healthy food on a plate, they will most likely not even touch it because they are so used to these unhealthy foods. There are hidden chemicals in the treats we give children that we may not even know what they are. In the article it shows, “Sweeteners, like aspartame, have been linked to depression and headaches. The snacks and treats that are often used to motivate or reward children for good behavior are not only full of sugar, but also contain dyes and preservatives. Dyes and preservatives have been found to cause hyperactivity and distractibility. Due to their smaller body weight and developing brains and bodies, children are at greater risk of the negative effects of these chemicals” (p 20). The importance of teaching our children what foods are beneficial for them is very essential for their development.

When children have a nutritious diet, they thrive in school and feel calmer, healthier, and more confident in their lives. However, a child cannot be expected to make healthy choices. If the rest of their family is continuously eating unhealthy foods. Children learn through modeling and observing so the entire family must be committed to this challenge. However, the change is a great opportunity for everyone in the family and it starts with awareness of what our children are eating at school and at home and it’s our responsibility to provide children with port to make the right food choices so that we can have children enjoying their long and healthy life while setting them up for their success in the future.

Small Advocacy Action

As a small but meaningful step towards promoting nutrition awareness, and eating healthy eating habits at school, I would initiate a school garden project. I would first meet with the principal to seek approval for this project and make sure that it aligns with school policies.

Once the principal approves it, I will find an outdoor area on the school grounds that receives the sunlight and has a big space for planting. I would also suggest adding a greenhouse to it just in case there is bad weather, and it's also a way for the plants to help each other grow as well. To start this project, I will send letters home and put them around the school, inviting parents or guardians, and staff to contribute recyclable materials, such as plastic containers, old pots, or milk cartons, which we will use and repurpose for planting containers. This will also serve to inform families and staff about the project and invite them if they are interested or have any questions for possible involvement. We will start the garden with easy- to-grow vegetables such as lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, and herbs. There are also some vegetables that don't require planting that we can grow to start us off. I will offer students the opportunity to help name our garden, and to vote on what's the plan first just so that students can feel very involved and engaged in this project. Teachers and students across different grade levels in the school will be invited to participate in the planting, maintenance and observation of the garden. To foster school wide engagement, teachers can collaborate to create a flexible schedule allowing regular visits and contributions to the garden. This will be great for all students to be informed in the instruction about nutrition, sustainability, and science. It also exposes children to different sensory opportunities, and it gives students a sense of ownership and pride when they are helping a school grow different vegetables and food.

As we get progress in the plants that are growing, we will document the progress with photos and display them in the school to raise awareness and generate excitement between students, staff and families. Once the produce can be used, we can have a cooking class and teach students how to prepare simple healthy meals, using fresh ingredients that they have grown themselves. Additionally, we can explore different partnerships with local restaurants, or

farmers markets, where we can donate surplus vegetables and exchange for fresh fruit, donations, or sponsorships. Students will learn many things in this garden project. They will gain knowledge about where food comes from and how it grows. They will also know why fresh food is important and why it matters to their health. Exposing children to fresh food at a young age will help them be more open to healthy options as they grow older. By integrating the garden into the curriculum and school, it inspires lasting changes and students' attitudes towards nutrition and healthy eating, while also promoting community collaboration and environmental responsibility as well.

Large Advocacy Action

To ensure that the garden project has long-term success and sustainability, program leaders – including teachers, staff, and administrators, should take an active role in advocating for our garden to be in the school. Getting our program leaders involved would have to include advocacy efforts that present the benefits of garden base, learning, and highlighting how it could be aligned into academic standards and proposing how gardening can be included in our existing curriculum. Gardening can be connected to different subjects. Students can learn science and plan biology and ecosystems. In math, they can measure the plants' growth and take data, in language, they can journal or make observation reports, and the most important which is their health and their nutrition education with food systems. Adding gardening into a curriculum supports their academic goals and creates a hands-on learning opportunity for children.

This program will be a community effort. We will be using staff, parent volunteers, and any members of our community to assist with the maintenance and oversight of the garden if required. We will need to have a schedule to ensure that the garden is watered and cared for during school breaks. Teachers and students can take responsibility for different sections of the

garden. To make our garden known to others outside of our school, progress of the garden can be documented and shared through newsletters, social media updates, school websites, or take home letters. This will show the connection between the school activities and family involvement, and also allows people to donate any items they would like for gardening such as gardening tools, or seeds and gardening beds. However, if we don't receive those donations, we can definitely ask our program leaders to support us with that. I also believe it's very important to include the cafeteria staff. We can try to incorporate the produce from the garden in two of our school meals, such as salads or side dishes. This allows students to see the full cycle of how you grow foods on a farm, and then you harvest those foods and ship them all for us to eat on our table. This whole project will enforce lessons about eating healthy and sustainability. It also will show children how we can make fresh food and it can be just as delicious and it's part of our everyday life. When we allow students to be exposed to these healthy new foods, they are most likely to try new vegetables and support them with their long, lasting healthy eating habits.

Commentary

After having first hand experience working with children who are on the autism spectrum, I have witnessed the impact that diet has on children's behavior, mood, and overall functioning. Far too often, when a child has these behavior or emotional challenges the first recommendation from medical professionals is to prescribe medication. Medication can be helpful in some cases however I have seen how dietary changes can lead to improvements in those challenges without having the need for medication anymore. I believe that this issue is urgent in the United States. We are surrounded by highly processed and poor foods that dominate the food market. Our children are being exposed to artificial additives, excessive sugars, and unhealthy fats on a daily basis. If you look at the ingredients, you don't even know what half of

those things are. Children on the spectrum and all children who are actively developing are especially vulnerable to the effects of poor nutrition. Despite all the emerging research that links a nutritious diet to mental health, behavior, regulation, and emotional stability, there is a great amount of people who lack awareness of this. My goal with this research is to raise awareness about the connection between nutrition and child development. Children spend most of their day at school and eat at least two meals there. It's important that we explore more how food systems can be improved and how nutrition education could be integrated into the curriculum for all children. If we can create environments where healthy food is accessible and promoted within education, we can improve academic outcomes and reduce behavior challenges seen in children. I aim to advocate for systemic changes that prioritize children's health and support their development in a more holistic and sustainable way.

Works Cited

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