

Culinary programs in schools offer benefits to children, set stage for healthier habits

URBANA, Ill. – Culinary programs in schools are improving eating habits, food preferences, and cooking skills among children.

Culinary programming in schools are limited and often delivered inconsistently, but a new review of culinary interventions with children in schools shows they bring a variety of benefits to the children who receive them, according to research authored by Henna Muzaffar, a visiting research coordinator in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at the University of Illinois.



The [paper](#), recently published in *Current Developments in Nutrition*, and co-authored by doctoral student Jessica Metcalfe and Barbara Fiese, professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I, previewed six culinary programs in schools, spanning three countries, with each program involving approximately 100-750 students. Qualitative evaluation of these culinary interventions indicated high program appeal for the participants.

Researchers investigated the features of each program to identify which increase success rates among participants. The study found that culinary programs which are multicomponent and/or integrated into the school curriculum and lunchroom had greater influence on the study population.

Hands-on culinary programs are also linked to children’s attitudes towards food, food preferences, and an improvement in other psychosocial variables. “When we look at the results of the six programs, data show improvements of dietary behaviors with regards to the participants’ intake of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains,” explains Muzaffar.

While these programs may not lead to a behavior change overnight, this study shows these programs change intentions which can ultimately lead to behavior change. “By doing the research and proving that the programs work, we can increase access and provide information about best practices,” Metcalfe says.

Researchers involved in the study emphasize the need to increase access to culinary programming in schools. “With increasing rates of obesity and less time for families to cook, there is an increased need for students to learn these skills so they can benefit from them for the rest of their lives,” explains Muzaffar.

The paper, “Narrative review of culinary interventions with children in schools to promote healthy eating: Directions for future research and practice” is published in *Current Developments in Nutrition* and is [available online](#) [DOI: 10.1093/cdn/nzy016]. Co-authors include Henna Muzaffar, Jessica Metcalfe, and Barbara Fiese.

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