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Rules of Engagement
By David Yeager
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A nutrition education program grabs kids' attention to get them to eat more veggies.

Kids often are reluctant to try new foods, especially if the new foods are vegetables. Whether our nation's ever-growing appetite for sugary or fatty foods or the fear of the unknown fuels that resistance, one thing is clear: Vegetables have an image problem among kids, and TV advertising often is to blame.

Sugary, high-fat foods frequently are marketed to children, and judging by the number of ads regularly shown on TV, those marketing efforts work. A March 2007 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that, on average, kids aged 2 to 7 see nearly 30 hours of food advertising on TV each year, and those aged 8 to 12 see nearly 50 hours, most of which is focused on products touted as tasty, fun, unique, or part of a contest or other promotion. In contrast, 2% of food ads targeted to both age groups use nutrition or health as a primary or secondary appeal. In addition, a February 2010 Rudd Report from Yale University found that the percentage of ads for healthful foods, including bottled water, fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, was less than 3%.

Lisa Suriano, MS, learned about these statistics when she began developing a nutrition education program to promote the taste and health benefits of vegetables to elementary school children. The program, called Veggiecation, of which Suriano is the CEO, teaches elementary school-aged kids about vegetables and other whole foods.

When Suriano first started the program, she realized she was competing with multimillion-dollar TV advertising campaigns for the kids' attention, so she got creative to make the program a success. "I realized I was trying to sell vegetables, beans, and other whole foods to children without any marketing materials," she says, "so that's when I started to come up with the concept for the program and develop it into what it is today."

Instructors for the program, called veggiecaters, go to different schools and make one of more than 150 simple, plant-based, allergen-sensitive recipes during classes or after school. As part of the program, free cooking classes for kids are offered at 23 Whole Foods stores in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

Each recipe consists of four or five ingredients and can be made using whatever resources are available at the school—no stove or oven is required. The veggiecaters bring their own demo kits, which consist of hand sanitizer, whisks, measuring spoons, mixing bowls, small blenders, safety knives, and cutting boards. Most of the recipes consist of raw food, but if an oven or stove is available the class can stir-fry or roast the ingredients.

Many of the recipes include dips, smoothies, dressings, and raw salads, and all of them can be made without soy, dairy, or gluten. The vegetables used are selected, in part, based on seasonal availability and their ability to be grown in a school garden. Some vegetables used include beans, broccoli, cabbage, cucumbers, jicama, and green leaf lettuce.

Play With Your Food

Veggiecation's purpose is to provide a fun, nonintimidating environment for kids to try foods to which they may not have been previously exposed. Suriano says the keys to making that happen are to keep kids engaged in the activity and positively address food resistance.

The veggiecaters begin by displaying Veggiecation's informational veggie posters and talking about the vegetables that are used in the recipe—where they grow, how they grow—which helps the kids make a personal connection to the food, either from their own experience or by hearing their peers talk about their experiences. The veggiecaters also talk about how to eat a balanced diet, based on the USDA's MyPlate guidelines, and how eating vegetables can help them.

"Part of the marketing piece of this is taking the messaging that's been used [to sell] fortified foods, functional foods, and beauty products and talk about how food really can be a beauty product for us or how it can make us think faster or feel happier, things like that," Suriano says. "Once you talk to kids about the fact that spinach is a good-mood food and it's going to make us feel happy, it serves to get them over the hump of resistance."

The next step is to make sure all the kids participate in making the recipe. This can be a challenge with a large class, but everyone gets a job, whether it's holding a bowl, measuring ingredients, or whisking them together (frequently using hand sanitizer to avoid cross-contamination). Suriano says it's important to show the kids how the recipe changes at each step in the process so they don't lose interest. It also helps build anticipation for tasting it, even if it's something they've never tried before.

Before the class tastes the food, Suriano asks them to try it twice—once to get over their fear of the unknown and once more to actually taste it. She tells them it's OK if they don't like it; at least they've experienced something new. Usually, the combination of making the recipe and seeing their classmates try it is enough to get the kids to taste it, but it's not required. "Once they've engaged with [the food], touched it, and actually made the recipe, I find very little resistance after that point," Suriano says.



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Show and Tell

Veggiecation also has a classroom companion that teachers can use to incorporate a discussion about vegetables into any subject. They can integrate such discussions independently from cooking through established curriculums. The classroom companions consist of lesson suggestions for all subjects, and they clearly document which standards teachers meet when they teach each lesson. Schools that buy into the Veggiecation program have access to supporting materials for one year through a members-only website.

Recently, Veggiecation began offering three-hour training sessions in conjunction with the YMCA of New York, so teachers can learn how to perform cooking demonstrations with their students. The Montefiore Children's Health Clinics in New York have inquired about training sessions.

Despite the interest in Veggiecation, Suriano still sees a need to make pediatric nutrition and childhood obesity a bigger part of the national conversation, and she believes schools can play a critical role in that conversation by talking directly to kids.

"There's sort of this perception that you have to make cupcakes and crafts with kids to keep them interested, and that's something we've proven is absolutely not true," Suriano says. "They will be just as interested in chickpeas and kale as long as you engage them" and encourage hands-on learning.

— *David Yeager is a freelance writer and editor in Royersford, Pennsylvania.*

Crazy Crunchy Cool Cucumber Salad

Serves 5

Tools and Equipment

Vegetable peeler, knife, cutting board, mixing bowls, measuring cups and spoons, whisk

Salad Ingredients

- 3 cucumbers (peel, cut in half lengthwise, remove seeds, and cut into 1/4-inch half moons)
- 1 cup thinly sliced radishes
- 4 T chopped fresh mint

Dressing Ingredients

- 1 T Dijon mustard
- 1 T honey
- 2 T white wine vinegar
- 4 T canola or olive oil
- Pinch of salt

Directions

1. In a mixing bowl, combine the cucumbers, radishes, and mint.
2. In a separate bowl, combine all the ingredients for the dressing and whisk until blended.
3. Pour the dressing over the cucumber and radish mixture, and toss gently.

Nutrient Analysis per serving

Calories: 137; Total fat: 11 g; Sat fat: 1 g; Trans fat: 0 g; Cholesterol: 0 mg; Sodium: 81 mg; Total carbohydrate: 8 g; Dietary fiber: 2 g; Sugars: 6 g; Protein: 2 g

— *Recipe courtesy of Veggiecation*



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