Healthy Living for Challenged Youth

AT A GLANCE
The Healthy Living for Challenged Youth program provides opportunities for 4-H Professionals to work with youth who are not the “typical” 4-H program participant.

The Situation
Navigating life from childhood to teen years is challenging, for some youth more than others. Teens in alternative schools and in the juvenile justice system may need increased support to succeed. They are often missing basic skill development – self-care, cooking and nutritional skills. Overall, Idaho teens are consuming less than the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. According to The Obesity Epidemic in Idaho, obesity rates between 2007-2009 for Bannock and Cassia counties were 28% and 27% respectively.

Our Response
The 4-H professionals from the Idaho 4-H Youth Development Office, Bannock and Cassia Counties received a Childhood Obesity Prevention Initiative Grant from Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation. The team designed the Healthy Living for Challenged Youth (HLCY) program. The program was designed to work with youth-at-risk audiences; the Bannock County site was conducted in an Intensive Supervision Program and Cassia County’s program was in an alternative high school.

The primary goal for the HLCY program was to increase the knowledge of healthy living, specifically fruit and vegetable consumption, among teens in alternative high schools or the juvenile justice systems at two sites in Southern Idaho. The two programs used sequential activities to address the promotion of healthy foods and beverages, nutrition, school gardening and food preservation. The hands-on curriculum incorporated skill development, which these teens applied in their day-to-day lives including installation and maintenance of a community garden at each site. A study done by researchers in Maine found a significant relationship between environmental indicators such as home vegetable gardening and daily intake of fruits and vegetables among youth (Sheehy & Dharod, 2008).

University of Idaho Extension professionals taught 18 interactive lessons at each site. The lessons included making healthy food choices, increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, growing a garden, and preserving fresh foods. Garden beds and greenhouses were constructed with teens at local sites.
**Program Outcomes**

Over three semesters a total of 119 youth participated in the program (Cassia n=87, Bannock n=32). Students were surveyed on their self-efficacy (the extent or strength of one's belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals) related to healthy living. The surveys were conducted at the beginning and end of each semester.

The survey questions were related to eating habits and how difficult it would be to eat more of some foods and less of others. A total of nine items were assessed on a scale of 0 (zero) for “Not hard at all”, 1 for “A little hard” and 2 for “Very hard” for a total of 18 possible points. The lower score indicated a greater ability for self-efficacy for healthy eating (Not hard at all). Pre and post survey scores were compared and it was found that 56% of the participants self reported an increase in their ability for eating healthier.

**Fruit and Vegetable Consumption**

Students were asked a series of questions related to their food consumption during a seven-day period of time. Students selected a rating representing 0-28 servings or pieces of food per week. It was found that in both counties the dietary intake behaviors with the highest average frequency were drinking milk and eating fruit. The behaviors with the lowest average frequency for both counties were eating carrots, potatoes or green salad.

**Healthy Living Skills Checklist**

Students were also asked to fill out a skills checklist that asked them questions about skills they may have learned during the program. This survey found that 71% of participants indicated that they usually wash their hands before eating, 47% of the participants indicated that they can sometimes name at least three common grains, 82% of the participants indicated that they usually can pour and correctly measure liquids like milk or oil and 80% of the participants indicated that they usually can correctly measure dry ingredients like flour or salt.

**The Future**

The Healthy Living for Challenged Youth program provided opportunities for 4-H Professionals to work with youth who are not the “typical” 4-H program participant. While the survey results may not appear significant, these youth developed skills they otherwise would not have. It is difficult to measure the short-term impact of this program because of the varying living situations of these youth. The relationships built within the separate juvenile justice departments in each county will lead to more educational opportunities for this audience.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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