



Most summer sites provide some kind of enrichment activity ([USDA, 2019](#)), but there is limited research on how the quality and type of activity impact participation and user experience. Some enrichment activities hope to boost physical fitness, some work to build confidence and independence, and others focus on healthy habits. With limited research on what kids and families most enjoy, Common Threads Farms (CTF) theorized that there had to be a way to develop a program that was fun for kids, and exposed them to new foods and healthy habits. Borrowing from their background as nutrition educators, they created a summer meals program with a unique twist: rather than be the passive recipients of food served, each day kids would learn about nutrition, new foods, and basic kitchen skills, and then have the chance to practice what they learned by preparing their own summer meals. When mealtime was over, program staff would join kids outside for fun and games.

With Executive Director Laura Platt as lead, CTF developed plans to test their idea in summer 2019. They piloted the idea at three summer meal sites for a total of nine weeks throughout the summer. From their work, the team hoped to test three related assumptions:

1. When kids have the opportunity to learn about new foods and prepare their own summer meals, they will enjoy themselves and be more excited about going to a summer meals site.
2. A participatory summer meals model, where kids are directly involved in meal preparation, is a good way get kids to eat healthy food served at summer meals sites.
3. When kids know more about healthy food and how it can be prepared, dietary preferences will shift, and they may be more likely to eat healthy food at home.

This idea was piloted in partnership with No Kid Hungry through The Test Kitchen, a concept accelerator designed to help nonprofits, schools, faith organizations, and local governments turn their best ideas into validated strategies and promising practices. To learn more about this pilot or how you can test your own idea, reach out to innovation@strength.org

IMPLEMENTATION

CTF seeks to connect kids with healthy food in the garden, the kitchen, and at the dinner table. With ample experience in school-based programs focused on fun and nutrition, CTF hoped to develop a summer meals model that functioned more like the programs they typically run. In their school-based programs, CTF uses food to entertain kids for hours at a time. The team felt confident that they could use the same approach with summer meals, and decided it was important that their sites feel more like a summer camp than a place you would stop by for a quick bite to eat.

Before moving forward with implementation, CTF took time to think about what a typical day in their program would look like from the perspective of a child. They ultimately developed a model where kids would convene early each day to prepare their own breakfasts. Once breakfast was over, they would break for activities outside. This would be followed by a lesson on new foods and common kitchen skills like chopping or peeling vegetables, and a chance to practice what they had learned with the preparation of lunch. When lunch was over and everyone had cleaned up, kids had another opportunity to play.

At all three sites, the team agreed that it was important that kids be able to stay onsite, all day, in an environment surrounded by adults who cared about them. This way parents would know that their kids were safe, and while most elected not to do so, they could leave the site if needed. CTF was able to experiment with this model in large part because they have significant support from AmeriCorps and could afford to staff the new sites without added labor costs.

With their model fully fleshed out, CTF reached out to key community partners to determine the best locations for their pilot. They quickly identified a community center and two low-income apartment complexes for the project. Local need was the primary factor when determining locations. The community center would benefit from the pilot because they had a three-week gap in their programming calendar they needed to fill, and while the apartment complexes were home to many kids in the community, historically these kids had limited opportunity to engage with one another in an organized fashion.

With locations selected and local partners on board, the next step was menu planning. Because CTF wanted to serve reimbursable meals that kids could prepare themselves, they had to pay attention to individual meal components and the steps required to complete each recipe. To keep it simple and reduce concerns about food safety, the team decided to serve only vegetarian meals and worked with a dietitian to ensure that meals were in compliance. Before the pilot could start, the team reached out to their state agency to bring them up to speed. The state agency immediately understood the value of youth involvement in summer meals and was happy to support the program.



CHALLENGES

Despite support from the state agency, the local health inspector was less supportive. Weeks before the pilot was slated to start, it looked like CTF would be unable to move forward due to complications with permitting. Eventually, CTF was able to persuade the health inspector that their model functioned more like a cooking class than a traditional summer meals site. Under this framing, the health inspector felt comfortable with the work moving forward and agreed that as a cooking class, their only role was to serve as a food safety advisor, rather than a regulator.

Prior to summer 2019, CTF had no experience as a summer meals sponsor. In order to be able to compare participation from summer 2018 and 2019, they chose one location, the community center, because it had served as a summer meal site before.

RESULTS

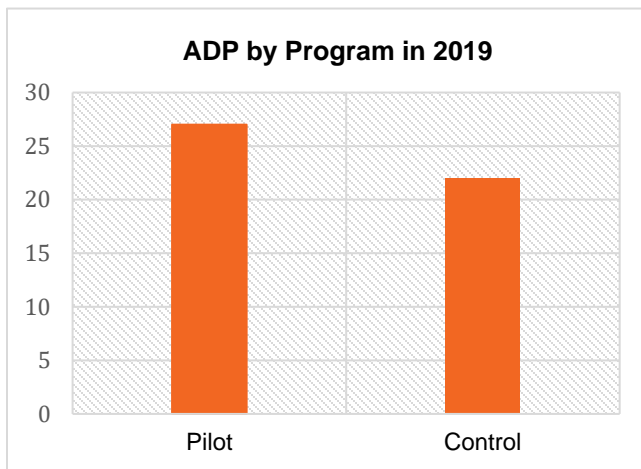
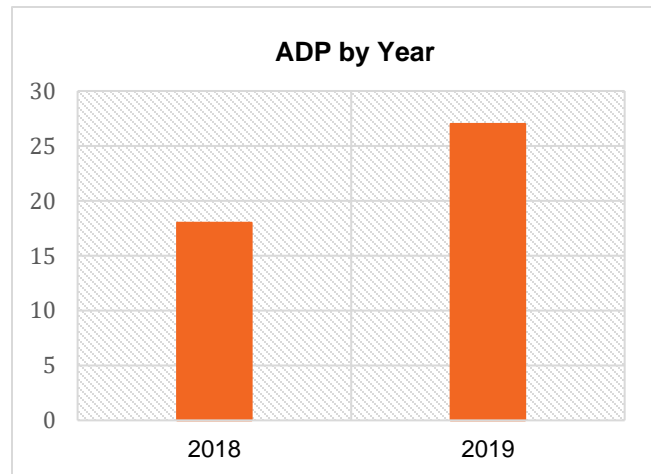
CTF successfully implemented the pilot in summer 2019. By the end of summer 2019, they served 768 meals to 98 kids across the three program sites. Data from the pilot illustrates that when kids have the chance to learn new food skills and practice learnings by preparing their own summer meals, it may improve user experience and increase participation. The work also supports the idea that a participatory summer meals model is an effective way to introduce kids to new foods. While conversations about the pilot with caregivers were positive, data collected was too limited to determine what effect the model had on eating behaviors at home. To evaluate the pilot, the team analyzed meal count data, conducted some interviews and surveys with caregivers, and made note of their observations.

Across the three pilot sites, kids were able to prepare their own summer meals in compliance with federal law. The state provided a reimbursement for all meals served. Participation at the community center was higher than participation at the apartment complexes. This may be because the community center has functioned as a trusted place parents count on for childcare, whereas childcare support has been nonexistent at the apartment complexes.

	Community Center	Apartment 1	Apartment 2
Kids Served	73	12	13
Meals Served	577	86	106

Staff felt like kids enjoyed the experience of learning how to cook healthy meals. Staff noted that when grating cheese for a meal, one kid explained that doing so made him feel proud of himself. Another child stated when chopping vegetables, “This turned out so delicious! We all did a great job.” When asked about the program overall, another student rated it as, “100 percent thumbs up.”

Because the apartment complex sites were new in summer 2019, only data from the community center could be used to assess impacts on participation. While the small sample size makes it impossible to draw conclusions about the impact this model has on summer meal participation, meal count data from the pilot does suggest a positive relationship. Baseline data from 2018 showed a 50 percent increase in average daily participation (ADP) from 2018 to 2019 when controlled for program days.



The community center continued to provide summer meals with an activity component following the conclusion of the pilot. This allowed for further data analysis that revealed that ADP was higher when the pilot was in operation compared to ADP for the rest of the summer. CTF theorized that the consistency provided by the pilot may explain this discrepancy. While the community center continued to provide activities for the remainder of the summer, the activity changed constantly and management of the program switched hands.

Program staff's observations also supported the idea that a participatory summer meals model can be a good way to introduce kids to new foods. During mealtime, it was common to overhear kids share how much they liked the foods they had prepared. One little girl exclaimed when she arrived, "We're making tofu? I love it 1000 percent." Another stated, "That hummus is delicious." Through meals served, some kids were able to try new foods for the first time. When these foods were served in kid-friendly ways, kids were more likely to give them a chance. For instance, when trying kale for the first time in a smoothie, one child explained, "I didn't even taste the kale."

Additionally, staff confirmed that the simple meals were the most popular. For example, the vegetable soup was far more popular than the chana masala. It seemed like kids needed an on-ramp to try new foods and when what was served seemed like something they were familiar with, it did not matter if the individual components were new.

While conversations about the pilot with caregivers were positive, data collected was too limited to determine what effect the model had on eating behaviors at home. CTF had a hard time scheduling interviews with caregivers and was only able to have a complete conversation with one individual. The caregiver did note, however, that her boys knew more about healthy food and seemed to be more curious about how they could help in the kitchen following program participation.

DISCUSSION



The pilot conducted by CTF in summer 2019 illustrates that enrichment activities at summer sites do not have to be limited to reading a book or playing outside to be effective. CTF found that food itself can be a great tool for engagement. When kids had the chance to learn about new foods, develop skills in the kitchen, and practice what they learned by preparing their own meals user experience improved and participation increased. Positive changes in ADP held constant even when compared to a summer meals program at the same location, where hands-on enrichment activities were also offered.

While a model where kids prepare their own summer meals may not work for all sponsors, this work may simply illustrate the value in consistent, hands-on enrichment activities at summer meal sites. CTF theorized that because they treated their pilot like a camp

instead of a summer meal site, kids were able to make new connections with other kids in their community and adults that cared about them, making a positive difference for the program overall.

The work also supports the idea that a participatory summer meals model is an effective way to introduce kids to new foods. While CTF was fortunate to have sites with kitchens, other sponsors may be less fortunate. To duplicate this model, sponsors should think about where meals will be prepared and what is realistic. While this pilot did not explore this, sponsors may be able to find creative ways to let kids participate in the meal through cooking demonstrations where kids learn about and are given meal components, and then have the chance to assemble the final product.

Without support from an organization like AmeriCorps, staffing costs may have been prohibitive. CTF staffed each site with three to four adults and all adults were onsite for seven hours each day. It may be worth exploring how a model like this would work with youth employees or volunteers.

Lastly, while data collected from this pilot was too limited to determine what effect the model had on eating behaviors at home, it may merit looking into further. The model was successful at introducing kids to new foods. Based on what kids had to say about these foods, it is possible that eating behaviors at home could have changed as a result.

TIPS AND TRICKS

During their planning process and throughout the summer, CTF learned a handful of tips and tricks to consider when it comes to making a model where kids learn about new foods, develop skills in the kitchen, and practice what they've learned by preparing their own summer meals:

1. Talk to your state agency and health inspector early. It can take time to build trust and buy-in around a new idea. If you are going to do something new, loop in regulators early and be prepared to make compromises.
2. You may think complicated meals taste better, but it is important to get feedback from kids on what kind of meals they like. CTF found that for the kids they serve, simple was better. In addition to seeking feedback from kids, organizations should seek feedback from other sponsors to learn what went over best with kids in their communities.
3. When you start serving meals at a new site, take the time to build relationships with the community. CTF found that participation at their new sites was much lower than at their established site. To make sure that the community knew about the program, staff knocked on doors each morning to invite kids to participate.
4. Collecting feedback from anyone can be a challenge. If you are going to collect feedback from program participants or their caregivers, find an easy way to connect with them onsite, and think about what else you might be able to do to make the process more convenient for them.