Research Support for the Cooking Matters Educational Approach

The goal of Share Our Strength’s Cooking Matters®, nationally sponsored by the ConAgra Foods® Foundation and Walmart, is for children at risk of hunger to have the healthy foods they need to grow and thrive throughout their lives. We seek to achieve this goal by providing nutrition education to those who impact the eating habits of these low-income children – their families, child care providers, and the children themselves. Historically, the field of nutrition education has struggled from a lack of documented and validated evaluation studies, making it difficult to determine the most effective strategies for improving dietary behaviors. However, over time, a consensus has developed in the field of what constitutes effective nutrition education (1-2):

- Focuses on behaviors, not knowledge
- Requires active participation
- Takes into account the motivations, barriers, needs, perceptions, and desires of particular population groups
- Includes self-assessment and feedback
- Applies an appropriate theoretical framework

As a leader in its field, Cooking Matters (formerly Share Our Strength’s Operation Frontline) has built its overwhelmingly successful programs around these principle tenets of effective nutrition education, earning a spotlight in Isobel Contento’s authoritative book, *Nutrition Education: Linking Research, Theory, and Practice* (3). Specifically:

- Our cooking-based courses teach participants the food preparation and food budgeting skills they need to make lasting changes to their eating habits. Research shows that low-income mothers who utilized food preparation and budgeting skills experienced food insecurity at half the rate of mothers who lacked these skills (4). This skills-based approach ensures that participants are able to implement specific, crucial behaviors as they go about their daily lives.
- Our courses are highly participatory. In order to teach skills and improve attitudes towards healthy foods, we believe it’s critical for participants to get into the kitchen and the grocery store, practice what they’re learning, and taste the healthy foods they’ve prepared themselves.
- Our instructors are trained to engage participants in active dialogue. Rather than lecture at participants, instructors will ask participants to suggest topics they are most interested in learning about, discuss their barriers to applying what they learn, and share their ideas for overcoming barriers with their peers.
- Our courses run for 6 weeks, allowing participants time to reflect on what they’ve learned throughout the course and receive feedback and positive reinforcement from course instructors and their peers for all that they’ve accomplished.
Our courses are built around the framework of Social Cognitive Theory, which has been successfully used to influence nutrition practices (5). The theory argues that behavior is dynamic, and that a continuing interaction takes place between a person’s behavior, their personal characteristics, and the environment in which the behavior is performed. A key construct of Social Cognitive Theory is self-efficacy, or the confidence one feels about performing a particular activity, shown to be a primary predictor of healthy food choices and other healthy behavior changes. As the individual successfully enacts a task, he or she develops increased expectations of succeeding in the task in the future, thereby enabling task initiation and perseverance, which promotes behavior change. The hands-on, skills-based, participatory nature of our courses, described above, is also intended to promote increased self-efficacy among participants, thereby enabling positive behavior changes.

In addition, Cooking Matters seeks to ensure that each of our curricula reflect the most current and tested thinking on appropriate content and facilitation methods for each audience we teach through regular, scheduled curricula updates. For example, an update of our flagship Cooking Matters for Adults curriculum for adults and parents involved research into adult learning styles and effective teaching strategies. This research corroborated our approach by showing that adults retain very little information when it is simply heard, but retain almost all the information they hear as they “do”, or practice what they’re learning. Further research into effective teaching methods to engage adult learners led to incorporation of Facilitated Dialogue techniques into the revised curriculum, creating a better experience for adult participants (6-8). Similarly, Cooking Matters undertakes an intensive formative research process for each of our curricula to review current research, gather feedback from the field on the successes and challenges of the current curricula, and incorporate this data into thoughtful revisions that allow us to strengthen the existing program. A recent revision of our Cooking Matters for Families program for parents and children together revealed that convenience and impact on household harmony were key determinants of family food decisions (9-10). Thus, revisions to the curriculum included increased focus on saving time in the kitchen and creating quick, home-cooked meals to reduce reliance on pre-prepared convenience foods, as well as promotion of improved communication between parents and children regarding food and increased involvement of the entire family in the food preparation process to reduce household tensions around family food decisions.

Thus, Cooking Matters has aligned itself with proven educational techniques and the most current evidence of what works for teaching each audience we target. Indeed, our evaluation results show that the Cooking Matters nutrition education program has been incredibly successful at promoting key nutrition and food resource management behaviors among participants. One study of the program
showed that of almost 2,200 *Cooking Matters for Adults* (formerly *Eating Right*) participants surveyed over 18 months, between 63% and 91% showed improvements, depending on the behavior measured (11). Another study showed that Cooking Matters participant behavior changes are sustained over time, with no significant differences between self-reported behavior changes at the end of class and at 3- or 6-month follow-ups (12). These results indicate that the successful strategies employed by Cooking Matters drive behavior changes that will ultimately help children at risk get the healthy foods they need.
Sources


