

Evaluation of a Mindful Eating Intervention Curriculum Among Elementary School Children and their Parents

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INTRODUCTION

In light of the high prevalence of unhealthy food behaviors and obesity among children, there is growing interest among nutrition researchers and educators in the mindful eating approach to address food behaviors. The mindful eating approach encourages paying purposeful attention to body-related sensations and to thoughts and feelings about food while practicing nonjudgment.¹ This awareness and acceptance can strengthen attention to internal hunger and fullness cues and decrease emotional eating resulting from negative emotions and other external cues. Research suggested that mindful eating interventions may reduce the frequency and intensity of cravings, emotional eating, and binge-eating episodes in adults.² However; there is limited information about the effectiveness of school-based mindful eating interventions. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate possible roles of parents in a mindful eating intervention among children.

CURRICULUM DESCRIPTION

Foodie U: The Impact of a Pilot Mindful Eating Intervention on Behaviors Among Children and Families (Foodie U) was a 2-year seed grant project of the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative Childhood Obesity Prevention program, funded through the US Department of

Agriculture.³ Using Experiential Learning Theory,⁴ a pilot mindful eating intervention curriculum was developed to foster healthy food behaviors among third- through fifth-grade children and their parents from a low-income school primarily consisting of Hispanic and non-Hispanic white students. Nutrition educators were recruited from university students who had completed 1 semester of community nutrition internship and a nutrition counseling course at California State University, Chico. Three-month training with university students began with a 1-day mindful eating workshop by a nutrition professor/clinical dietitian with extensive professional experience in teaching mindful eating practices, followed by activities such as developing educational and research tools and attending meetings with the elementary school personnel for coordination. Based in part on principles and components of the Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training,⁵ the curriculum consisted of 2 parent workshops for mindful eating skill building, 6 45- to 60-minute monthly classroom activities by nutrition educators (Figure), and 6 take-home activities, which were provided after each in-class lesson to promote mindful eating practices at home with parents (Table 1). Teachers remained in the classroom to facilitate behavior management and were encouraged to participate in activities. Bilingual

(English/Spanish) take-home kits consisted of an activity, a recipe, and/or nonperishable items. Students were encouraged to practice the same mindful eating exercise at home with their parents.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION AND RESULTS

The Institutional Review Board of California State University, Chico granted ethical approval to conduct this study. A total of 178 third- through fifth-grade children and their parents participated in *Foodie U*. This article focuses primarily on the process evaluation of the project. All curriculum evaluation instruments were based on previous existing instruments⁶ as well as preintervention focus groups previously conducted by the authors. Face and content validity of the instruments were examined and evaluated by a professional panel including nutrition professors specializing in mindful eating, an educational psychology professor, registered dietitians, and elementary school teachers. Monthly parent feedback surveys and 4 focus groups were conducted in their preferred languages (English or Spanish) to assess parents' perspectives on the curriculum. The survey included parent and child involvement in the take-home activities, satisfaction with the materials and activities, and willingness to continue practicing them. About 33% of parents (n = 58), including 28% of non-Hispanic white (n = 26) and 37% of Hispanic parents (n = 28), submitted a feedback survey at least once. Overall, the survey showed that all activities were easy to follow and were well liked by parents. Take-home activities 1, 3, and 5 had the highest completion rates. Focus groups were conducted by 2 trained researchers. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes. Data were transcribed and Spanish data were translated into

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Table 1. Summary of *Foodie U* Classroom and Take-Home Activities

Lesson Topics and Classroom Activities	Take-Home Activities
Lesson 1: Master Mindless Munching. Students explore how their daily environment can influence eating choices and behaviors. Activities focus on awareness of factors that influence portion size.	Portion Distortion Activity. Students and family members serve the amount of popcorn they would each normally eat into both large and small bowls, then compare the measured amount of food in each dish.
Lesson 2: Sensational Senses. Students practice noticing sensory characteristics of dried herbs and spices and are encouraged to make connections to associated memories. Students follow a guided worksheet to explore all sensory attributes of a food and discuss the value of taking time to enjoy all that a food has to offer.	Five Senses Snack Activity. Students and family members use the same worksheet used in class to explore the sensory attributes of a food. Students are encouraged to lead their parents through the tasting and discuss with their family the value of food enjoyment.
Lesson 3: Getting to Know Hunger and Fullness. Students discuss awareness of the feeling and meaning of hunger and fullness cues. Students practice using a visual Hunger and Fullness Scale to determine an appropriate snack portion and to notice changes in their hunger and fullness cues as they eat.	Hunger and Fullness Scale. Students teach their family members how to use the Hunger and Fullness Scale to evaluate hunger level before eating a meal, select an appropriate initial portion, and use the scale to monitor changes in hunger and fullness cues during and after the meal.
Lesson 4: Emotions Inside Out. Students participate in a brief group discussion to address the difference between physical and emotional needs and the potential influence of emotions on eating behaviors. Students practice mindfulness-based visualization exercises to increase nonjudgmental awareness of emotions.	Mindful Choices. Interview students or family members select 3 different food options and each family member selects 1 that he or she would most like to eat. Each person takes turns interviewing another person about what thoughts and emotions led them to make that choice.
Lesson 5: Planting Seeds of Mindfulness. Students identify the resources and individuals involved in producing 1 food item. Students will practice a guided mindful eating exercise aimed to increase awareness and appreciation of the resources and people who produced the food item. Students will plant a seed and identify the resources it will need to grow.	Nurturing Seeds of Mindfulness. Students receive a seed packet with care and transplanting instructions. The family member(s) and student will visit a farmers' market, grocery store, or library together to answer questions about the resources and individuals involved in the life story of the plant they are growing.
Lesson 6: Cultural Celebration Feast. Students prepare culturally inspired healthy foods. Students create a pleasant dining area. Students and parents practice mindful eating skills introduced in previous lessons such as evaluating hunger and appreciating sensory characteristics of the tastings and the resources involved in bringing them to the table.	Family Culture Celebration Meal. Students and family members select and work together to prepare a culturally relevant meal. Students will help decorate and set the dining area. An informal discussion guide will be provided to encourage the sharing of cultural and family traditions.

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Figure. Students reviewing a hunger–fullness chart.

English. Two trained qualitative researchers independently completed open coding was by and all authors compared and compiled coding results to identify overarching themes. Focus groups with 37 parents revealed that the intervention helped parents understand the concept of mindful eating and incorporate the mindful eating tools, including the hunger–fullness scale and portion sizes, into their mindful food parenting practices. Spanish-speaking participants noted

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