

Together We Inspire Smart Eating: A Preschool Curriculum for Obesity Prevention in Low-Income Families

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INTRODUCTION

Few young children consume recommended level of fruits and vegetables.¹ High-quality preschool programs often provide food experiences to expose children to healthy food options.^{2,3} However, personal experiences of early childhood educators may inhibit their ability to create a nurturing environment at mealtime and to educate children about nutritious foods. *Together, We Inspire Smart Eating (WISE)* was developed to support educators of young children.⁴⁻¹² The *WISE* curriculum is intended to be used in weekly food experiences in preschool such as *Head Start* and schools using the *Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program*.¹³

The intervention, *WISE*, was designed to establish healthy early eating habits for children aged 3–8 years. The intervention included 3 key components: (1) a classroom curriculum, (2) educator training, and (3) parent education using materials for outreach. This report presents a brief summary of the development of the components of *WISE*. Change in nutrition knowledge of educators across time was examined. Sustainable knowledge is critical given that knowledge and awareness are necessary prerequisites for adoption of new behaviors.^{14,15} This report provides the foundation for later, more detailed process and impact evaluations of *WISE*.

Summary of Development

The development of *WISE* was based on US Department of Agriculture recommendations¹⁶ combined with concepts of the socioecological model.¹⁷ After an extensive literature review, *WISE* curriculum components were developed to be consistent with research-based evidence of nutrition promotion for children. Furthermore, components were aligned with state regulations, national standards, and recommendations from experts (eg, American Pediatric Association). In the development of the classroom curriculum, classroom observations and in-person conversations with educators provided targets for educator training.¹⁸ For example, educators often pressured children to consume food regardless of hunger cues; they typically failed to model intake of healthy foods; and they discouraged manipulation of new foods.¹⁸ These attitudes can stem from a teacher's personal history with food.¹⁹ In our formative work, educators lacked food as children, and 33% indicated current food insecurity.¹²

This formative work provided the basis of educator training targeting use of hunger cues, modeling healthy food consumption, and guiding children in sensory food experiences. The *WISE* intervention was structured to reduce educator time to meet existing educational requirements and be

budget sensitive. In the development of *WISE* parent education and outreach materials, secondary analyses of data from low-income families were analyzed.⁶ This informed the method and content of the parent education component.

The Curriculum

Classroom curriculum. In an extensive manual, *WISE* was organized with 8 monthly discovery units, as listed in the [Figure](#). The [Figure](#) describes 5 steps found in each unit, which provided background “appetizer” education (step 1). The month began with a farmer letter and the arrival of the food. The curriculum mascot, Windy Wise, was a barn owl puppet who traveled between the classroom and farm to deliver farm news. Food was introduced with sensory exploration (step 2).

For the remainder of the month, educators selected food activities for weekly hands-on food interactions in small groups (step 3). The primary objective was to maximize children's interaction with foods. Materials supported the integration of *WISE* into other educational activities (eg, math). Each month included closing activities to transition to the next food (steps 4 and 5). Foods introduced early in the school year recurred as companion ingredients in later months.

Educator training. Training for educators consisted of an interactive 6-hour training based on adult learning theories^{20,21} and included active instruction, monitoring, and feedback. In training, educators explored their role in child nutrition, discussed food attitudes and beliefs, practiced using *WISE*, and practiced using resources to connect with and educate families. After training, educators reported learning new information (98%), understanding the goals of *WISE* (100%), holding the view that *WISE* would be useful (100%),

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<p>Discovery Units:</p>  <p>8 units cover a variety of fruits and vegetables including:</p> <p>Apples • Tomatoes • Sweet Potatoes Bell Peppers • Carrots • Berries Greens • Green Beans</p>	<p>1. Appetizer for Educators:</p> <p> Tomatoes Arrive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delicious Stuff to Know • Vocabulary and skills • Calendar to Guide Experience <p>This section prepares the educator for the food highlighted in the unit. A full list of vocabulary and skills is offered along with unit sections in which they are featured. A calendar is provided to guide educators through the introduction of the fruit or vegetable featured and the various food experiences offered in each unit.</p>	<p>2. The First Bite:</p> <p> Exploring Bell Peppers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter From the Farmer • Fruit/Vegetable Arrives • Exploring Fruit/Vegetable <p>Children are introduced to the featured fruit or vegetable. A letter from a local or regional farmer arrives with Windy Wise. The letter introduces the food and teaches children about the farm where it is grown.</p> <p>The arrival of the food follows in a few days and the week ends with children exploring the food using a variety of senses: Touch, smell, sound, sight, and taste (optional)</p>
<p>3. Food Experiences:</p> <p> Smashed Fruit Fizz</p> <p>The Food Experiences Menu features six recipes that allow children to experience the featured fruit or vegetable in a variety of forms. Children will assist in preparation of these recipes and will receive safe and supervised experience with a variety of kitchen utensils and tools. Each lesson provides learning objectives that align with teaching standards (e.g., Teaching Strategies Gold) to assist educators with lesson planning and portfolio documentation.</p>	<p>4. The LAST Bite:</p> <p> The LAST Bite...</p> <p>The LAST Bite includes closing activities for each unit.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a “Things we’ve learned” chart with children’s drawings • Add paper cut-out of featured food to “Windy’s Foods” basket • Select Á La Carte ideas to extend WISE learning in other areas 	<p>5. Á La Carte</p> <p> Extension Activities</p> <p>This optional section features material and activities to enhance the unit and to add additional opportunities for learning. A list of children’s books is included in this section along with a variety of songs, poems, and games that feature the fruit or vegetable included in the unit. Extension activities broaden educational opportunities to areas such as art, science, math, language, and literacy. Learning center activities facilitate individualized, experiential learning.</p>
<p>WISE Cost</p> <p><i>Estimated food cost of WISE/classroom/year: \$210.20</i></p> <p><i>Average cost of one WISE unit/classroom: \$26.28</i></p> <p><i>Curriculum training provided in one-day</i> <i>Estimates based on based on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 2015-2016 pre-K school year grocery prices in a Southern state ◆ Classroom size = 20 students ◆ 1 WISE unit = 4 food activities 	 <p>we inspire smart eating</p> <p>www.windywise.com</p> <p>Copyright UAMS/WISE 2017</p>	

Figure. Components of Together, We Inspire Smart Eating (WISE).²³

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