

The Fresh Fruit in Schools Project, HSE Dublin North- East Area

Schools offer a most important opportunity for educating children on nutritional issues and facilitating and encouraging healthy eating patterns alongside the development of academic and social skills. As a result, the Health Promotion Department, including the community dietitians, in the HSE Dublin North-East Area decided to run a pilot scheme in a number of designated disadvantaged primary schools in the region. It was to be similar to the Fresh Fruit in Schools Project which had been run in Northern Ireland.

Aims of the Scheme

- To provide access to fruit for all pupils within the selected schools
- To encourage children to develop the habit of eating fruit
- To encourage children to adopt and sustain healthy eating patterns in school, at home and in the community.

How the Scheme Operated

Fourteen designated disadvantaged primary schools were invited to participate in the project. Each school was sent the following:

- An explanatory letter regarding the project for the principal
- A parent information leaflet explaining the project
- A parent questionnaire looking at baseline fruit and vegetable consumption in the home.

Attached to this questionnaire was a consent form which parents were requested to complete to allow their child to participate in the project. All 14 schools agreed to participate in the project. It was arranged that the project would operate for four weeks prior and six weeks after the Christmas break 2006/7. A fruit and vegetable supplier was secured who was able to supply fruit to each of the 14 schools across the region and delivery dates and times were agreed locally.

Evaluation

At the end of the ten-week pilot period, an evaluation was carried out using questionnaires completed by the school principal, teachers, parents and pupils in each school.

Discussion

Based on the findings from the evaluation questionnaires, the pilot project was very well received. Although the scheme placed additional demands on staff time, these demands were deemed to be reasonable. Teachers reported better dietary intakes as a result of the fruit provided, and the effect of peer influences was positive with children trying fruit in the classroom who would not normally have taken fruit. The scheme also appeared to have helped to improve behaviour and concentration levels in the classroom. Some parents reported an improved intake of fruit, both at school and at home, amongst the whole family. Principals, teachers and parents all reported that they would like to see the scheme continue. The fact that all children in the selected schools received fruit would have enhanced the success of the scheme as research indicates that peers now have a stronger influence on children's eating habits than family, so children may be particularly motivated to eat fruit at school when it is a group activity.

Conclusions

Given the positive response obtained in the evaluation, it is recommended that a more proactive and sustained commitment encompassing all schools be established and implemented in the area. In the meantime, the experience gained in this pilot scheme can be harnessed and replicated. Its learning outcomes include encouraging teachers to take a lead role, using classroom activities to emphasise the benefits of fruit, involving peers and older children, engaging parents and aligning the programme to national campaigns and programmes.

Want More Information?

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