

# Cooking in the classroom to fight childhood obesity

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Based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other reports that childhood obesity has tripled over the past 30 years, we recognize the importance of reaching our children early to form good food habits. However, with teachers having to incorporate more and more learning standards into their already packed curriculums, where does that leave room for nutrition education in elementary schools? Perhaps by putting it into school subjects like geography and the study of other cultures, math, and science. A study in the November/December 2011 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* shows how the Cooking with Kids program successfully helps students learn school subjects and develop cooking skills.

Cooking with Kids is an experiential food and [nutrition education program](#) for elementary school [students](#), based on social learning theory and food acceptance principles (<http://www.cookingwithkids.net>). Students explore, prepare, and enjoy fresh, affordable foods from diverse cultural traditions. Founder and executive director Lynn Walters and program director Jane Stacey have developed integrated curriculum materials for grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-6. Cooking with Kids also encourages students to treat each other respectfully and to practice the social skills of working together to prepare a meal and then sitting down to eat together.

As part of a larger evaluation of the program, investigators from the Colorado State University Department of Food Science and [Human Nutrition](#) interviewed 178 fourth-graders to determine students' cooking attitudes and experiences at school and home after a series of cooking plus tasting or just tasting classes alone. Their teachers and Cooking with Kids food educators were also interviewed. Students and their teachers who participated in both types of experiential classes described positive experiences with curriculum integration into academic subjects, and those

receiving cooking classes reported opportunities to enhance their social skills. The study also found that students in cooking plus tasting schools did not perceive cooking-related tasks at home as 'chores', unlike students who received just tasting classes or those who did not receive either type of class. And, in general, students' perspectives were that the curriculum strengthened their understanding of the content of school subjects.

Dr. Leslie Cunningham-Sabo, PhD, RD, Assistant Professor at Colorado State University, says, "This study describes student and teacher perceptions about the integration of nutrition education programs with academic curriculum topics, which is essential in justifying nutrition education's continued place in the school curriculum. It documents the importance of including cooking in school curriculum as it is a practical mechanism to promote health, social and educational skills to better prepare students for adulthood."

**More information:** The article is "Qualitative Investigation of the Cooking with Kids Program: Focus Group Interviews with Fourth-Grade Students, Teachers, and Food Educators" by Catherine V. Lukas, MS, RD and Leslie Cunningham-Sabo, PhD, RD. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 43, Issue 6 (November/December 2011)

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