



Community Action Opportunities

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Head Start Presents Fabulous Food for Three, Four and Five-Year Olds!

You wouldn't think it, but school food can be nutritional, educational and exciting – that is, if you are a child in the Head Start Program of Buncombe and Madison counties!

Head Start participates in the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP.) The CACFP has high standards for menu planning, staff training and meal preparation.



Children who attend Head Start eat a healthy breakfast and lunch. Children who attend longer days also get a nutritious snack.

“We're able to satisfy at least two-thirds of their daily food requirement in terms of calories, vitamins and minerals,” says W.A. Harris, R.D., LDN, Nutrition Specialist for Head Start.”

Yet W.A. Harris along with the Head Start Food Specialists and teachers do much more than meet dietary requirements. The program incorporates good nutrition into all aspects of the child's day, addresses nutrition-related health issues and explores nutrition issues with the family and community.

For his part, Mr. Harris creates new experiences and opportunities for children during meal time. “When I look at creating a menu, I look at foods that I know they're familiar with that they'll absolutely love, but at the same time, I look at other foods that they might like but they haven't been exposed to because their family is on a tight budget – like fresh carrot sticks, squash sticks and broccoli,” Mr. Harris explains.

“My goal is to make sure that these children are exposed to a variety of foods so that when they start school there will be no thing new to them.

When a child tries something 15 to 30 times, they start to like the food.”

Mr. Harris has a few tricks up his sleeve in case the children need tempting. “I do a Mexican pizza with cheese, beans and salsa and roll it up like a burrito. I put in a small salad with romaine lettuce rather than iceberg lettuce, which is less nutritional,” explains Mr. Harris. “The children see the sour cream or cheese on the side. Then they can build their own meal – decide whether they want to eat each item separately or combine them.”

Mr. Harris encourages the children explore food and be creative. “A plate with a variety of colors, textures, and shapes is more appealing to adults – and children,” says Mr. Harris who worked in restaurants as a student. “So I might choose a tortilla that is pink, green lettuce, brown taco meat, a red tomato, and a little yellow color. It’s a trick every good chef knows.”

“Still,” Mr. Harris laughs, “the trays with chicken nuggets and mashed potatoes always comes back empty!” Head Start teachers take those trays of food and turn them into nutritional learning opportunities! Head Start teachers emphasize good eating and healthy foods in unique ways as part of their daily lesson plans. They use fruit and vegetables to talk about colors or shapes. One group used strawberries to show triangles, sliced star fruit to show a 5-pointed star, and sliced kiwi to show circles. Teachers point out that corn and pineapple are very different foods, but have the same color. They ask children how the color of broccoli changes when it’s cooked.

One of Mr. Harris’ favorite programs is Color Me Healthy with a series of posters and flashcards. “On one side you’ll see a beautiful ear of corn and on the other side you’ll see the corn in the field, so that you learn where it came from.” Teachers ask that the cooks provide them with one whole pineapple and then one sliced pineapple. “Some of our kids have only ever seen a pineapple out of a can. I want to make sure that these kids try some really good food,” says Mr. Harris.

Other teachers this year have performed an apple taste test, asking children to compare the color and taste of a Red Delicious, a Granny Smith, and a Golden Delicious. Then the children decide which kind they like best. Another teacher made a fruit roll from apple sauce. She had the children spread the apple sauce across a pan and cook it slowly. After lunch, they tasted it.

“These are just a few of the ways,” says Mr. Harris, “that we are taking the USDA nutritional guidelines and turning them into fabulous food and fun for three, four and five year olds!” Children receive a variety of health screenings including child physical assessment, hematocrit/hemoglobin testing and child growth assessment. Head Start then develops a nutrition assessment for each child in the program.

Parent education, nutritional counseling and menu planning are all part of the process. Head Start staff team up with parents and with health care providers to ensure that all children in the program receive appropriate nutritional support and follow up.

Head Start also takes nutrition one step further by inviting families to be part of the nutrition team. Families participate in planning menus for childcare centers that reflect the family’s culture and eating preferences. “When it comes to Head Start nutrition,” says Mr. Harris, “educational opportunities for children, families *and* staff abound!”

Community Action Opportunities
25 Gaston Street
Asheville, NC 28801
P 828.252.2495
F 828.253.6319
Madison County Toll Free 877.989.2495
www.communityactionopportunities.org