

Teaching Kids: Food Education in America

BY JULIE CROSS



PHOTO BY CHRIS BOHNHOFF

One example of a food education program for children is Midwest Food Connection (www.midwestfoodconnection.org), supported since 1994 by Twin Cities natural food co-ops. Here, Haruko Ruggiero teaches a class about eating oats and other whole grains.

If you're reading this during store hours, chances are that someone at your co-op is teaching a kid about food right now. Truth be told, it's actually more difficult to avoid teaching kids about food than to do it—most kids are passionately interested in food, and most cooperators are in it (at least partly) because we love food. Every time one of your staff answers a question from a young shopper, you have food education in action.

To grow, prosper, and cooperate, however, it's helpful to formalize our approach to education and be ready to teach kids outside the store. While all community involvement is good, getting your co-op into the public schools gives you name recognition, builds community ties, and differentiates your brand (Anybody see Trader Joe's here? Anyone?) in a way that nothing else can quite match. Outreach through food education is effective and remarkably simple.

The Davis Food Co-op offers food education in a number of different venues, including staffing a booth at the Farmer's Market and attending dozens of events each year. The main focus of our outreach effort to kids is our "Carrots in the Classroom"

program (see CG #117, March–April 2005), which carries out roughly 80 elementary school classroom visits each year. We present junior and senior high school classes with our "Five Things We Want You to Know About Food" lecture (see sidebar), complete with snacks and an always-lively question-and-answer session. We'll also visit any preschool, public or private, to run our Snack Race with kids, and we offer the same "Five Things" lecture to any parent group that wants us.

Delivering the goods

Planning a program, getting buy-in from teachers, recruiting instructors, and setting up equipment is surprisingly simple. Eventually, though, you end up in a room full of kids with the sinking realization that you don't have a whip and a chair. How do you teach kids, and particularly large groups of kids, about food?

Start by writing a lesson plan. You probably already know what you want to teach and have a general idea of how to go about it. While that's often enough for an adult group, it's a very good idea to have a more detailed plan for kids. Calculate how long you'll spend on each segment of your

presentation, and have a plan in place in case the timing is off. This is particularly crucial if you're actually cooking with the kids—what will you do if the food burns or if you're running out of time without finishing the food?

Whatever type of lesson you come up with, if you're working with kids, you must plan to involve your audience. Even junior high students have difficulty paying attention for the duration of a straightforward speech. Kids need a chance to talk, to touch or smell things, or even to move around the room. With preschool kids, we talk about healthy snack choices. For each choice, we put a "bad" snack at one end of the room and a "good" snack at the other, then let the kids race to the one they think is healthy. Interspersing two minutes of talking with 30 seconds of running lets even small kids maintain interest (and good behavior!).

Once you have a lesson in mind, practice it in real time, with the tools and ingredients you think you'll need. Can you actually open the bag of cookies without spilling, or do you need to bring scissors? Is there down time while you wait for things to cook? You need patter to fill it. Whether you're a novice or an experienced presenter, you'll benefit ►

An All-Purpose Lecture

It's good to have an all-purpose lecture in your pocket. Ours is a presentation called "Five Things We Want You to Know About Food."

We change the tone of it to suit the audience, since 9th graders don't have precisely the same food concerns as the parents of toddlers, but the message remains the same: here's a place to start improving the way you eat. We often use snacks as a way of reinforcing our message.

Five Things We Want You to Know About Food

1 If you're only going to remember one thing I tell you today, please remember this, because it may save your life: **Don't eat trans fats.** We then explain the history of trans fats, point out that labeling laws permit saying something has "0 grams of trans fat per serving" for amounts under half a gram, and cite statistics from the Nurses Health Study. Because Girl Scout Cookies contain trans fat, we serve Newman's Own Cookies.

**0g
TRANS
FAT**

2 **Drink less soda.** We don't say "none" because we try to save our absolutes for really important stuff. We discuss empty calories and displacing good calories with empty ones, talk about high-fructose corn syrup and phosphoric acid, and talk about artificial sweeteners. Sometimes we serve an interesting juice or nondairy milk; sometime we don't.



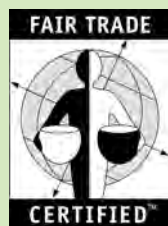
3 **Eat five servings a day of fruits and vegetables.** Define a serving, then ask the audience to hold up their hands if they had even one serving yesterday. Ask them to keep their hands up if they had at least two, at least three, etc., until all hands are down. Talk about why we want to eat a variety of fresh produce, and then we serve dried mango.



4 **Eat more fiber.** Discuss soluble and insoluble fiber, insulin and the possible advantages of getting fiber from food instead of a bottle. Participants get to sample black bean tortilla chips.



5 **Think about your food.** We usually use the 39¢ taco as our illustration. What else can you buy for 39¢? What had to happen to get that food to your table, and are you okay with it once you've thought about it? Serve fair trade chocolate.



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◀ from actually giving your presentation, out loud and with props, even if it's only to the dog.

Along with practice, the wise speaker plans for problems. You can't stop the kid from throwing up, having a food allergy you weren't aware of, or climbing under the table and barking, but you can be prepared with a towel, a package of fruit leather, and a good sense of humor. Keep in mind the goal of your presentation, and adapt as needed to reach that goal.

No matter how well you prepare, you can't cover all the questions you'll get from the average school child. (A love of the TV show "Jeopardy" may help.) The winning question from 2010 was, "Can you eat people?" from a 9th grader, which I answered with a brief lesson on the dangers of eating too high on the food chain. If you're a quick thinker, reasonably well informed about your topic, and not afraid to say you don't know the answer, you'll be fine.

The question-and-answer section is often the best learning opportunity you can offer because it gives kids a chance to get information they actually need and gives you a chance to refine your presentation. With junior high and above, students, who are often paralyzed with fear of speaking to a stranger in front of their peers, are given scrap paper at the beginning of class and asked to write down one question about food or eating. The combination of

Member Linkage

With true co-op economy, we try our level best to make every program serve multiple ends. Involving our membership in our educational efforts seemed like a natural part of doing double duty.

For the Davis Food Co-op teaching kitchen's birthday party in August 2010, we invited our members to stop by for cake. We also asked them to bring things teachers could use for the coming school year. Two hundred cupcakes later, our members had filled 80 co-op shopping bags with pencils, markers, paper, and more, not to mention wellness samples, cookies, and energy bars donated by our suppliers. We emailed our list of teachers (gathered when we made arrangements for classroom visits) to see who wanted a bag, filled up the van, and delivered bags the day school opened.

This spring, we will involve both our members and the larger community in another school project: providing produce for home economics classes to cook. With the deep budget cuts in place in California, the home ec classes require students to bring food from home to cook in class. The Davis Food Co-op will ask Farmer's Market shoppers to buy an extra produce item for the classes and to use our booth as a collection point. Our farmers will garner an extra sale, our kids will get food to cook, and we'll get public service brownie points.



taking time to think and getting everyone to participate helps reduce fear.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, be respectful of your students. Most kids are accustomed to being talked down to and treated as, well, kids. Treat them instead as colleagues who share

your interest in food, or people who want to play, or very important members of your community. Every time one of us walks into a classroom, asks a question and listens intently to the answers, kids transform—and take the first step towards a life in co-ops. ■

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