

What If I Don't Like Bananas?

Kids Café offers better nutritional choices

By Kirsten Compton



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Clap once if you can hear me; clap twice if you can hear me NOW." Two claps ring out and a hush falls over the children seated in lines on the floor at the Marty Birdman Neighborhood Center in Tucson. As part of the Kids Café after-school feeding program they're getting a nutrition lesson this Monday afternoon on avoiding germs and bacteria. Then they'll help prepare—and eat—their own healthy snack before going out to play.

"After I call your name stand up, go wash your hands and then sit down at the tables so we can start the lesson" says Anthony Pabst, a University of Arizona freshman at the center. Activity books featuring today's topic are distributed to the 16 students present, and recreation assistant Carrie L. Joe begins.

"What happens when you put the milk in the cabinet instead of the fridge?" she asks. Ten hands fly up but they're

too late. Someone blurts out the response, "It gets rotten!" The lively exchange continues as Joe and the children discuss ways to store food properly and prevent food poisoning.

Part of the challenge in Kids Café is to hold the children's attention after they've already spent the day in school. There is just enough time to give them a 15-minute lesson at 4:30, offer a snack and let them play outside before they are picked up about an hour later. Lessons have to get to the point quickly, according to Patricia Sparks, a lecturer in the UA department of nutritional sciences, who has been involved with Kids Café since its inception in Tucson in 2001.

"The Community Food Bank or site manager may come up with programs and lessons based on needs," Sparks says. "I've done lessons on a variety of food groups, on calcium and other topics, using games, worksheets, crossword puzzles—things to help reinforce the lesson because attention spans range pretty dramatically."

She says the lessons may focus on physical activity as well because some of the children may have difficulties with weight control.

Sparks worked with food bank staff in developing the curriculum and also coordinates student volunteers and interns from her courses on food management and food sciences. About 75 nutritional sciences students volunteer at five neighborhood centers twice each semester; they can go twice more for extra credit. There are 500 to 600 student visits annually, which works out well for nutritional science students, since applicants for dietetic internships must document volunteer hours or work hours related to nutrition or nutrition education.

They assist the recreational workers at the centers during the lesson, and actually teach the lessons at three locations. This was made possible by a grant obtained through Arizona Cooperative Extension's involvement in the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP).

"Kids Café provides participating children the opportunity to interact with students who are much closer to their age than the typical volunteer," Sparks says. The students in Kids Café range from about 6 to 12 years old, and many have never before seen or tried some of the foods they eat during their lessons.

"A typical snack might include milk or yogurt, a fruit or vegetable, such as baby carrots or celery sticks, perhaps a half sandwich or a granola bar," Sparks explains. "Even just showing these kids fruits and vegetables and giving them the opportunity to taste them is fun because their experience is limited. Mango, kiwi, pineapple and other fruits can be something different for them."

Food choices are limited to what the Food Bank has on hand, which often is more variety than the children get at home. This is echoed by Soroosh Behshad, another UA nutri-



tional sciences student, who volunteers at Kids Café. He says many of the kids had their first experience with yogurt at Kids Café, and now they not only have tasted it, but really like it.

"It's very useful to get the children involved in food preparation because it gets them to try things they might otherwise stick up their noses at," Sparks adds. Today's snack is graham crackers topped with peanut butter, jelly and sliced bananas. Each child makes his or her own, and for a while the room is filled with the sound of small mouths chewing crackers. The food is disappearing but not everyone is satisfied.

"I hate bananas, do I have to eat them?" complains a boy sitting up front. No, he doesn't have to, but the instructors do encourage the youngsters to try everything at least once. "Just try two or three bites" is the Kids Café mantra. While it doesn't always change a child's mind, sometimes it does make a difference.

"We get to try new things," said one little girl. "One time we had yogurt with nuts and I don't like nuts. But there are different nuts and I keep trying them. I like the different ones." Having the children prepare their own snack portions also helps.

"They love it because they get to prepare everything," Joe says. "They cut up foods with plastic utensils." Most of the food offered is cold, although the centers have also featured hot food in the past; it depends on the facilities and what is available.

Volunteers in the program have seen a difference in the children's habits.

"The kids are learning a lot, like washing their hands. I am not at home with

"Kids Café allows these kids to be exposed to nutrition education, many for the first time, by bringing attention to new foods, the food pyramid and food intake."

—Michael Rozen, a nutritional sciences student and Kids Café volunteer.

them, but I know it is making a difference," Pabst notes.

Stacy Lyons, one of Sparks' students who is teaching nutrition classes this fall, notices that the younger students are beginning learn more about food groups and where their food comes from.

"One kid finally realized that french fries came from potatoes and raisins came from grapes," she said. "I think it is great that we are targeting kids at a young age about what is good and what is bad using the food pyramid. The kids finally understand what the food pyramid is." The teaching experience helps not only the children, but also the student teachers. "It makes you realize what you know and don't know, sort of a mini-introduction to the real world."

Once all the children have had their fill of juice and graham crackers, the room suddenly becomes very restless. Little hands reach for the jump ropes and basketballs, and the race for the door begins after the children have cleaned up the plates, cups and utensils. Once they have left for the day the hope is that they will select more nutritious food when they do have a choice.

"I've seen some changes," says Ron Gardin, recreational coordinator of the Marty Birdman Center. "This program has taught the children how to ask for peanut butter and bread instead of candy and sweet stuff." They are given an information sheet to give to their parents at the end of each lesson.

"It's a win-win situation; the neighborhood children get education and snacks; our college students get valuable experience," Sparks said. "I think that as an institution we need to be involved in outreach education." ■



What is Kids Café?

Nationally, more than nine million children receive food from a pantry, kitchen or shelter from America's Second Harvest, the country's largest emergency food network. One of the programs started by America's Second Harvest to combat childhood hunger was Kids Café. In 2001, when Kids Café began in Tucson, the Arizona's child poverty rate was 22.3 percent. The program is offered twice weekly in seven locations across Tucson and features a 15-minute lesson followed by a snack made from food provided by the Tucson Community Food Bank. Currently, there are more than 1,000 Kids Cafés across the nation.



"One boy never had yogurt before. Now he asks his parents for it. He loves it and wants it all the time."

—Meshylla Gardner, senior recreational worker at the Marty Birdman Center in Tucson

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