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Loren Babirak
Kelly Cunningham
James Dunlop
Jenny Nguyen
Cheddhi Thomas

See next page for additional authors

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THE WHAT’S, WHERE’S, AND WHY’S OF WHAT YOUR FAMILY EATS: THE BURLINGTON CHILDREN’S SPACE FARM TO TABLE PROGRAM

Loren Babirak, Kelly Cunningham, James Dunlop, Jenny Nguyen, Cheddhi Thomas, Zea Schultz, Michael Visker, Nancy Drucker, MD, Barbara Frankowski, MD
University of Vermont College of Medicine and Burlington Children’s Space

Introduction
Preventing childhood obesity is a national priority, and changing dietary behavior in both children and adults is challenging. Burlington Children’s Space, Inc. (BCS), a private, non-profit early education and childcare center providing services for families in the Burlington area, is trying to do just that. The Farm to Table Project was designed to positively influence the food choices of students and their families as well as to cultivate a relationship between families and local farmers. In an effort to secure expanded funding for the school’s food program, BCS requested that we assess the effectiveness of their Food Program.

Methods
Survey Design: A 17 question survey was designed to assess the eating habits and behaviors of the families of the children who were enrolled in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Food Program or “farm to table” style program. Data was collected by administering the survey on site to the parents of children who were enrolled in our garden/playground project called “the garden belongs to the children.” (n=37).

A follow up interview was conducted with a volunteer subgroup (n=15) of the survey participants, using open-ended questions, over dinner prepared and served at BCS.

Results
37 surveys distributed; 37 surveys returned – 100% response rate

Discussion
Children often do not talk to their parents about what they ate at school. These results may be explained in part by the children’s limited language skills and a tendency for children to misplace paper communications from BCS. Additionally, the routine nature of the Farm to Table lunch program may contribute to the lack of communication between students and their families.

BSC families sincerely appreciate the Farm to Table Program and recognize its beneficial effect on their children’s eating habits. One parent noted “[BCS lunches] expose the children to new foods they don’t normally eat at home”. Another parent said that the “Program helps to destigmatize the lunchtime experience and allows the kids to feel more comfortable trying new foods”.

The parent interviews at the dinner helped us to form recommendations for continuing to develop the Farm to Table Program (see Recommendations section).

Recommendations
• Posting brightly colored flyers on bulletin boards by the entrance to improve communication between BCS and families regarding the Farm to Table Program
• Including healthy recipes in BCS’s lunch menu calendar to increase their awareness of and interest in healthy food choices
• Providing the families with samples of the different foods prepared that week
• Composing a BCS community cookbook of recipes contributed by the parents and staff
• Utilizing more ingredients from local sources or farms for meals
• Organizing “family dinner nights” hosted by BCS to highlight the Farm to Table program
• Publishing a yearbook including pictures of the children and their favorite recipes

The Farm to Table program is showing promise in its ability to influence the eating habits of young children. The program has not only enriched the lives of the children in the program but has also benefitted the parents by saving them time and giving them peace of mind. Future directions of this project could be aimed at improving the eating habits of the entire family.

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