

Bridging Cooking Skills & Nutrition with *Cooking Matters*

Cooking Matters is a national curriculum that traditionally focuses on nutrition education through lessons focused on both purchasing and preparing meals. In grocery store sessions, participants explore nutrition labels and price points. Cooking classes bring the whole family to the kitchen to learn techniques and strategies for enjoying healthy, nutritious meals. Through innovative virtual lessons, Polk, St. Croix and Pierce participants in Wisconsin found energy and engagement with Cooking Matters.

A Challenge

During 2019, FoodWise Coordinator for Polk, St. Croix and Pierce counties in northwestern Wisconsin Katie Bartko had the opportunity to participate in a statewide Cooking Matters pilot. She was excited about the curriculum because it filled a space she was seeing in the community, saying “people want cooking classes even more than nutrition, and with this they get both.” She led two successful sessions in-person before COVID rearranged the programming.

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Katie saw the Cooking Matters design as one that allows for participants to learn from one another. Similarly, the series provided a chance for a whole family to show up and cook together. The incentives, funded by Cooking Matters, encouraged families to come together around preparing and sharing meals as well. Because of these important connections and building points, it didn’t seem clear that the curriculum could continue until in-person education resumed.

A Solution

Connecting with community partners, Katie found there was still an interest in this series that pairs skills-building alongside nutrition. She has found that the sessions can really be a special time for a parent or caregiver to learn and explore their own skills. Directing extra budget on postage, Katie also keeps a sense of personal contact by mailing out gift cards for groceries and aprons for younger cooks.

Adjusting to the situational limits has been important as well. Investing in a high-quality camera, Katie brings visual focus for clear food demonstrations. This is especially helpful with showing techniques such as with knife skills. She embraces a sense of ‘magic of tv’ by having an item ready to pull from the oven, which makes effective use of time as a group while moving through a recipe.



Successes

As a result of this work, Katie has completed five 3-session series during 2020 and 2021. This included a total of 33 participants, nearly all adults. While in-person classes would include at least twice that number if every parent brought at least one child, parents report high engagement and confidence in the skills they learned. Katie felt the virtual setting actually increased attendance.

Participation also relies on partners. When partners are able to put efforts into outreach, the results can lead to exciting innovations. Head Start connected with Katie asking for recipes specific to using crockpots that the organization had to give out to participants. This flexibility of the curriculum, paired with the opportunity of providing this appliance, helped participants learn healthy meals as they navigated the slow cooker.

Looking forward, Katie has confidence in the curriculum and exploring this space for building cooking skills that is often left out.



The teacher was really good, explained things really well and let us interact with her. It was nice to hear from other moms and what they do with their children.

- Participant

Thanks for all the great information, techniques, and recipes!! I am very grateful for the opportunity and learned so much!! THANK YOU!!

- Participant