

Linking Kids to Good Nutrition

By Tracy Nelson

707 words

Todd Galati and Katie Bogue love introducing kids to new healthy foods.

Bogue and Galati are the co-creators of Nutrition Link, a nutrition education program for fourth and fifth graders at Rosa Parks Elementary School and all six Lemon Grove School District Elementary Schools, based at the Division of Community Pediatrics at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), and is funded by the California Nutrition Network.

The program was created because of a shared desire to help prevent childhood obesity and promote healthy nutrition through education.

More than fifteen percent of children ages six to 11 are obese, according to the American Obesity Association website. Carrying this excess body weight can increase a child's risk of developing diseases like diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, osteoarthritis and sleep apnea.

“You need to have knowledge to make healthy choices,” said Galati, the project manager. “The kids need the information because they're making bad choices. The kids think a bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos is lunch. A lot of them have heard that fruits and vegetables are important, but they don't know why.”

And that's where Nutrition Link comes into play. The program is made up of both web-based and in-class lessons that Galati and Bogue create based on the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans and they help teachers meet the California Contents Standards for school curriculum. Galati and Bogue incorporate the already existing core-curriculum subjects like

math, science, reading and geography into all of the lessons in order to connect what the kids are learning in class to nutrition.

“[The program is] hitting nutrition standards that [teachers] would have had to teach anyways,” said Bogue, project coordinator and dietitian. “And it builds on it.”

“In the curriculum of Nutrition Link, there are things that should be taught everywhere,” said Galati. “Incorporate fruits and vegetables, limit portion size and get active.”

The idea for Nutrition Link came out of a program called C.A.T.C.H. (Coordinated Approach To Child Health), a nation-wide health, physical and education program evaluated by USCD (1991-94). CATCH was a resource for creating the Nutrition Link syllabus.

“We have created a really strong curriculum,” said Bogue.

The kids do two web lessons, created by web designer David Martin, and receive one in-class lesson from Galati and Bogue each month, where they do hands-on activities, totaling one hour of nutrition education. This year they’ll teach in 40 classrooms to nearly 1,200 students.

“To be able to reach seven schools, 40 classrooms and about 1,200 kids and then also to be able to reach their families, to me is a much greater achievement than being able to do something a little more in depth with [fewer students],” said Galati.

Nutrition Link focuses on fourth and fifth graders because research has shown that at this age, kids start to make their own choices about what they eat, especially with snacks, and they can understand the level of knowledge Nutrition Link wants to provide, said Bogue.

“We make it gross and cool and that motivates them,” said Bogue. “They scoop out how much Crisco is in their triple-cheeseburger.”

Galati and Bogue hope to engage the kids’ parents in the program more by conducting nutrition related discussions on topics like diabetes, depression and ADD. They are working on

developing a parental section of the Nutrition Link website with recipes and activities so the parents can get involved with what their kids are learning.

“I want to promote health prevention rather than deal with it after the fact,” said Bogue. “I could work in a hospital, but I’d rather be promoting before anything happens.”

They also hope to one day expand the program to many different schools, with the help of Dr. Vivian Reznik, Nutrition Link’s principal investigator and a pediatrician at UCSD. But for now, Galati and Bogue get ready to begin Nutrition Link’s eighth year in mid-October.

“The best part is working with the kids and getting to see how when you come into the class they’re happy to see you and tell you about the changes they’ve made, and getting to make a difference with the kids,” said Galati. “We’re not going to change the lives of every student, but hopefully we’ll impact a large percentage of them.”

Tracy Nelson is an intern with the UCSD San Diego EXPORT Center and a journalism student at Point Loma Nazarene University. The San Diego EXPORT Center is a partnership of organizations focusing on community minority health and health disparities research.