

Mindful Nutrition, Playful Education

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Abstract

Let's first redefine health, and more specifically children's health. Traditionally, the concept of children's health has received little consideration. But children fundamentally differ from adults. Children's health, development, achievements, and social attainments have come to require the interest, guidance, and protection of both families and society—not just for the intrinsic value of children but for society's collective future. This view of childhood is embedded in the very foundation of such social institutions as schools and the health-care system, which play important roles in preparing children for the challenges of modern times and ensuring that, as they grow and develop into adults, they are prepared for life in an increasingly complex world. Building upon the abundant evidence that children's health has special characteristics, a comprehensive and integrative definition of health that reflects the dynamic nature of childhood emerges.

Children's health is the extent to which individual children or groups of children are able or enabled to (a) develop and realize their potential, (b) satisfy their needs, and (c) develop the capacities that allow them to interact successfully with their biological, physical, and social environments.

This definition views health as a positive resource that gives children the ability to interact with their surroundings and to respond to life's challenges and changes. Moreover, it incorporates development in the definition and specifies a fundamental principle of development—the optimization and maintenance of function over time. At the same time, it focuses on the intrinsic characteristics of children and their resources for interacting with the environment.

More importantly, this new concept implicitly embraces the ethical principle of precaution: if we adults adopt the notion that every child has the right to develop and realize his or her full potential, then we should protect our children by preventing harmful exposure to environmental influences, these being social, emotional, physical, or nutritional.

One of the most salient influences on development and health in children is nutrition.

Children should have the best start possible, so their food should be the healthiest possible because this is the period when bodies are growing and minds are developing, allowing them to experiment, think, remember, and learn.

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One of the most important and common elements for precaution is to take preventive action. If we want a healthy future, we need healthy children, and in order to have healthy children they have to eat the right quantity as well as quality. What do we mean by quality? Food that is not contaminated or grown in artificial ways or preserved chemically. But children and their parents lack information and education. Where better to start than at school in educating our future adults. How? By creating programs that promote mindful nutrition in a playful way and allow children of all ages to learn by experiencing food.

This is exactly what the section on nutrition and education of the department of agriculture and alimentation of the Province of Modena has been doing. A substantial number of projects have been developed and implemented that deal with education and nutrition. These projects are especially important because they take into account various ages, starting with very small children, still in day care, and move up to involving preschoolers, elementary schoolchildren, and ultimately high school students. Each project aims to involve both children and adolescents, as well as their parents, and derives from the vision that the child is an active participant, continuously interacting with other children, adults, and the environment surrounding him/her.

Food is fun and can be healthy at the same time. Seeing, touching, smelling, growing, preparing, tasting—they all stimulate the maturation of the child's identity and the development of autonomy and skills. Offering healthy choices and helping to create them gives the child as well as the adult a sense of control and the idea that change and prevention go hand in hand. The final goal is to promote and help individuals practice healthy eating behaviors and make healthier choices day by day and one step at a time.

In this way, knowing becomes growing and growing becomes knowing.

Precaution through education is reasonable, rational and responsible and . . .it works!

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