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Childhood hunger is a solvable issue

08/01/2013 | Christine Carr, MSN Causes



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A program teaches low-income families how to make nutritious, low-cost meals.



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Sixteen million children in America deal with hunger on a daily basis.

It's a serious issue, as [childhood hunger affects kids' health and well-being on every level](#).

"We know that when kids don't get enough to eat, they don't do as well in school, they're more likely to get sick, and they're less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college," says Megan Bradley, a registered dietitian for [Cooking Matters](#), a program that teaches low-income families how to create delicious and nutritious meals on a shoestring budget. "Therefore, in the future, they may be more at risk for not being able to feed their own kids."

It's also a solvable issue, and [Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign](#) is taking major steps toward the solution by building awareness, connecting kids and families with resources and, through Cooking Matters education, teaching people how to stretch their food budgets.

Cooking Matters is now in its 20th year and has more than 100,000 graduates across all 50 states. It is fueled by volunteers, community agencies and national sponsorship support from the Conagra Foods Foundation and Walmart, all working together to end the cycle of hunger.

In partnership with food banks, Head Start programs and schools with high free- and reduced-lunch populations, Cooking Matters offers six-week courses for adults, families, teens ages 13-18 and kids ages 8-12. Each weekly session features a nutrition and food topic, followed by hands-on cooking.

In a family course, parents and kids create such tasty concoctions as stir fries or veggie wraps, while a course for kids has 8-year-olds learning how to make nonfat yogurt parfaits with fresh fruit and other simple snacks and meals. Adult and teens get a bag of groceries to take home and practice what they learned. They also participate in a one-time guided grocery-store tour, Shopping Matters, where they learn about label reading, unit pricing, the pros and cons of different types of produce and more – basic skills that can make a difference while shopping on a budget.

Bradley, who grew up hungry herself, oversees Cooking Matters programs in the Denver area. She enjoys recounting the tale of a Denver school principal who reported watching a group of second-graders loading up their plates with salad during lunch – a new behavior they'd learned in Cooking Matters. And then there was the single dad who took the course with his kids and turned cooking into a fun family affair at home. They donned chef hats and shared photos of the meals they made together with their Cooking Matters instructor. "That brings tears to my eyes," says Bradley, who appreciates how the course builds not only self-sufficiency but family and a sense of community.

She strongly encourages kids to take advantage of resources such as school breakfasts. In fact, a new analysis released by No Kid Hungry shows that kids who eat breakfast score 17.5% higher on tests, attend school 1.5 more days per year and are 20% more likely to graduate. "When kids can come [to school] nourished, they can be ready to learn, and then they can set themselves up for success in their lives," she says

Cooking Matters is always seeking volunteers. While culinary or nutrition professionals usually fill the role of educators, you don't need a specific background to assist with a class or to volunteer as a store tour guide.

September is Hunger Action Month, and No Kid Hungry offers lots of ways for kids and families to get involved in the cause. Go orange, the color of hunger awareness. Host a bake sale for No Kid Hungry or a fundraising event to raise support for a summer meals site for kids in your community. Dedicate your birthday or other special events to No Kid Hungry and ask for donations instead of gifts. Visit NoKidHungry2.org for more details

about how to implement these ideas and others while earning reward points. Getting involved can also be as simple as taking the [No Kid Hungry pledge](#).

There's no better time to join the No Kid Hungry movement. Hunger prevents kids from reaching their potential, and by playing a role in the solution, you're investing in the future of kids.