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Evolution of Crunch&Sip – focusing on increasing children’s vegetable intake

The recent burden of disease analyses released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare highlight the importance of diet in the prevention of a range of diseases, especially cancer. Fruit and vegetables are particularly important cancer-preventing foods. Dietary behaviours are established early in life, making childhood nutrition interventions that target fruit and vegetable consumption an important component of health policy and practice.

The Crunch&Sip program has been implemented by Cancer Council WA in Western Australian schools since 2005, and has since been adopted in some other Australian states. The aim of the Crunch&Sip program is to encourage schools to allocate time for the consumption of fruit and vegetables during class time to increase children’s intake of these important foods. Over 40% of WA primary schools currently participate in the Crunch&Sip program.

Most primary school-aged children in Western Australia are now consuming appropriate quantities of fruit, but their vegetable intake is still woefully inadequate. To address this problem, the Crunch&Sip program has recently evolved to feature a specific focus on vegetables. Cancer Council WA has conducted a study to assess the receptiveness of school staff and parents to adopting a vegetable focus for Crunch&Sip. The study yielded positive results. For example, 66% of surveyed primary school teachers reported that they would be supportive of converting the Crunch&Sip program to have a primary focus on vegetables. Along with increasing vegetable intake, such a strategy was considered by teachers to be useful in teaching children good eating habits, encouraging them to sample a broader range of vegetables, and minimising the mess associated with eating during class time. The vegetables that were nominated as being most appropriate for consumption during class time were carrots, celery, cucumber and capsicum.

The primary perceived barriers to focusing on vegetables in Crunch&Sip were reported by teachers to be a preference among children for fruit over vegetables and a lack of parental support. Various strategies were reported as having the potential to overcome these barriers, including the availability of engaging classroom resources (e.g. colourful posters depicting vegetables) and information materials to send home to parents.

Cancer Council WA has used these results to pilot a vegetable-focused version of Crunch&Sip in 32 WA schools. The project included curriculum resources focused around vegetables, newsletter inserts, parent letters and vegetable merchandise. The results have been promising, with the number of children bringing at least some vegetables for Crunch&Sip each day doubling over the pilot period. In addition, positive changes were observed in teachers’ knowledge and confidence to teach children about vegetables, and in perceived student and parent attitudes towards vegetables. Based on these results, the revised program has been rolled out to all schools in WA.

References

Sharp G, Pettigrew S, Wright S, et al. Potential in-class strategies to increase children’s vegetable consumption. Public Health Nutrition 2017;DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001700012X>