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Head Start nutrition and health tracking help families with what they consume

By Nancy Ludwig, MS, RDN, LD, Head Start Consulting Nutritionist

School started in September and for those of you who are new to Head Start, I'd like to share the nutritional goals and reasons for the questionnaire, what health measurements are, and tracking.

Head Start is required to have a nutrition consultant with credentials as a registered dietitian/nutritionist (RDN). I have been in that role since 2012 and I enjoy writing for the Siletz Tribal newspaper.

Because children are cared for and influenced by others, I see Head Start nutrition as a community concern. The connection between our health and what we eat extends to the health of the entire community.

I attempt to relate nutrition to all aspects of health and lifestyle. This includes trauma, mental health, immune support and inflammatory diseases, as well as empowering food skills, family mealtime connections and much more.

I emphasize the health benefits of traditional foods. To be practical, when I share recipes I include the concept of "nutritional equivalents" to include economical foods that are available in grocery stores with preparation ideas for busy families.

The Head Start program has nutritional goals in five areas of focus. The areas include identification of nutritional needs, nutritional services, meal service, family assistance with nutrition, and food safety and sanitation.

Identification of nutritional needs is met with opportunities for staff and parents to discuss each child's nutritional needs. This may occur using the questionnaires during enrollment, at a home visit, or during other meetings with the staff.

It is important that parents communicate disabilities, struggles and/or food sensitivities as these may require special nutritional support or feeding require-

ments. A registered dietitian (me) is available to support families with nutritional needs and concerns. I encourage parents to ask for this additional nutrition support as part of the Head Start program.

Nutritional services require the program to offer a variety of foods that take into account cultural and ethnic preferences and broaden the child's food experience along with meeting the nutritional needs and feeding requirements for the children (including special needs).

If you have concerns about this, please contact the program or ask to speak with the nutritionist.

Meal service is ideally family style, where children serve themselves from a variety of foods at a table with sufficient time to eat. Conversation is encouraged to contribute to the development and socialization of each child. Food is not used as reward or punishment.

COVID precautions required meal service changes that were made temporarily.

Family assistance with nutrition includes periodic educational opportunities for parents and classroom nutrition education each week with in-classroom activities for children.

Families may also qualify for other benefits such as WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Families may also need assistance finding additional food resources such as access to food pantries.

Food safety and sanitation measures protect the health and safety of everyone. Tribal health inspectors as well as the state review and audit the program. Self-inspections are also conducted quarterly.

In addition to the five areas of nutritional focus, Head Start is required to track growth and other health information, such as hemoglobin. One purpose behind measuring health indicators is to document outcomes.

If the program demonstrates success, funding seems more likely to continue. On the other hand, when health indicators reveal increased risk, a closer look is needed to identify possible changes to better support families. Children's health and nutrition indicators are documented in two primary ways – nutrition screening forms and periodic measurements.

Nutrition screening forms are used at parent orientation with questions about your child's eating habits or special needs. Periodic measurements include weight and height for all students twice per school year, as well as hemoglobin testing (with confidentiality in place).

When height and weight are measured, BMI, or body mass index, is calculated. It is not a perfect way to track growth and can be invalid, but is a federal requirement for funding. With its limitations in mind, it is important to assess growth over time, not just once.

High and low BMI values trigger a referral. This does not necessarily mean there is a problem, but it is currently a marker to offer extra care for this child. A referral may be in the form of a letter requesting that you follow up with your doctor or a referral to the consulting dietitian/nutritionist.

Please keep in mind this is not punishment and this service is available to all Head Start families, even when BMI is within normal range. If you want to consult the dietitian about nutrition concerns, this service is covered by Head Start and offered free of charge to Head Start families.

Hemoglobin testing is conducted to screen for possible anemia. Hemoglobin is found in the red blood cells and is responsible for carrying oxygen around the body.

When hemoglobin is low, the body doesn't have what it needs to function well. Symptoms in children are often different than those experienced by adults. These can include poor neurological development, disturbed behavior, paleness, rapid

heartbeat, difficulty learning and low levels of concentration. This is contrasted with adults who primarily report feeling sluggish and tired.

Head Start parents have rights to accept or refuse tests. Being informed about the purpose of the tests helps parents make informed decisions regarding their children.

Other health indicators or screenings include hearing, vision, dental exam, blood pressure, lead, immunizations, DIAL-4*, physical exam, medical home, dental home, and insurance.

*DIAL-4 examines three areas of development – motor, concepts and language. It is designed to determine whether a child is developing within the average range for his/her age or whether there is some indication of a possible delay in his/her development.

Head Start nutrition education ideally continues at home during family meals. Conversations about food can support healthy eating habits, lifelong curiosity and learning. It can be easy and fun to start the conversation by describing colors, textures, flavors, sounds and smells without using good and bad words (such as yummy or yucky).

Remember that a child sometimes needs to see the food many times before he/she is willing to try it. A positive attitude also goes a long way in helping children feel safe to explore. Don't underestimate the power of role modeling. What the adults do is far more influential than what adults say.

Please know that Siletz Tribal Head Start offers nutritional support at no cost to Head Start families. This usually occurs over the telephone. If you have nutrition concerns about your Head Start child or want to discuss family nutrition concerns, please contact your teacher or the director and ask to speak to the nutritionist. We want to support your children and families.