

Farm-to-Preschool Program

Helps Give Kids an Early Taste for Eating Locally

By Susan Russo

Why don't kids eat more fruits and vegetables? The easy answer is, "they don't like them." The truth is, it's our fault. We give up too easily. Fortunately for many San Diego children, Kristine Smith refuses to give up.

Smith, director of nutrition services at San Diego's Neighborhood House Association (NHA), says, "Children will eat all types of fruits and vegetables. You just have to get them to try it. And I don't give up easily if they don't like something."

Getting kids to try new, healthy foods is what Smith has been doing for the past four years. A registered dietitian, she arrived at the NHA four years ago and overhauled the central prep kitchen that serves over 7,000 meals to over 3,500 low-income, preschool-aged children in San Diego. Processed frozen fish sticks were out; salmon tacos were in. High-carbohydrate snacks such as animal crackers were swapped out for whole-grain options.

"I faced some resistance at first," says Smith, "but after four years, pretty much everyone—children, parents and staff—is on board."

Which is why, last February, Smith volunteered to oversee the Farm to Preschool program, a 2-year pilot currently managed by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

The pilot program, currently underway, is based at the Barbara Young Fielding (BYF) Early Learning Academy, an early Head Start (HS) center for 2- and 3-year-old children in San Diego. Its goal is to connect children and families to their food and to local farmers so they can begin to understand the basics of eating healthy, locally grown food.

Smith and HS teachers use an experiential curriculum that engages children in hands-on learning activities. They take field trips



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to farms, help tend an on-site garden and participate in Harvest of the Month activities, such as taste tests and cooking demonstrations.

Last spring, when Smith wanted to introduce the children to seasonal fresh peas, she didn't plop a bowl of peas in front of them. She took them on a field trip to Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center in National City. The children scampered around the gardens, wiggled their fingers in the earth, played with worms, watered crops and picked vegetables.

"Many of these children aren't afforded these opportunities at home, so it was great to see them having so much fun," says Smith.

Amy Carstensen, executive director of Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center, agrees.

"We work to engage all five senses and make it

playful," she says, because "children this young start forming their preferences for food, [so] the sooner [they] adopt fresh fruit and vegetables into their diet, the easier it will be to maintain throughout their development."

The children had fun, but did they eat the peas? "Oh, yes!" says Smith. A teacher led them through a taste test: They talked about the color and shape of the pea pods, popped the peas from the shells, counted how many were inside and then ate them.

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Once Smith completes the pilot Farm to Preschool program, hopefully by the end of the next school year, she intends to expand it to all 25 NHA HS sites in San Diego.

"It's the perfect age to teach kids about healthy eating," says Smith. "They're like little sponges, and they're building habits that will last a lifetime. If we don't teach them proper nutrition at that time, they may never learn healthy eating habits. And we can't do that to our children."

For more information, please visit neighborhoodhouse.org. To contact Kristine Smith or to inquire about volunteer opportunities, call 619-683-7453 or email her at kmsmith@neighborhoodhouse.org.

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Photo courtesy Neighborhood House Association