

ANALOG LIFE

The Small Act of Gardening's Big Effects on Childhood Obesity

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Growing fruits and vegetables together as a family can be one of the most fun and engaging activities that you do with your children. In addition to the general benefits of being outside with nature, gardening connects kids with their food, instills an appreciation for where food comes from, and provides them with a sense of accomplishment when they witness the seeds they plant grow into delicious food. Gardening also improves Body Mass Index (BMI) and nutrition knowledge for children, according to a new study published in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior.

The study assessed the effectiveness of a program at several California schools called the Shaping Healthy Choices Program (SHCP). Designed for upper elementary school children, the program's goal is to improve dietary behaviors and prevent childhood obesity. It achieves this through nutrition education and promotion, family and community partnerships, supporting regional agriculture, offering healthy food on school campuses, and school wellness committees and policies.



For the assessment, four schools in two California districts were evaluated, with 179 fourth grade students (aged 9-10 years) serving as controls and 230 in an intervention group who participated in the program's activities. Over the course of one year, the students participated in classroom nutrition education using gardens at the schools, harvested vegetables for cooking demonstrations, and shared the produce with their families. In addition, newsletters about the lessons were sent home, health fairs were held at school, salad bars were installed in school lunch rooms, and school wellness committees were created.

As a result of these programs centered around gardening, students showed significant improvements in nutrition knowledge and vegetable identification compared to the students who were not part of the program. The children were exposed to more vegetables, which encouraged them to try new healthy foods.

Additionally, major positive changes were observed in body measurements. The BMI and waist-to-height ratio were greatly improved in intervention groups, with the overweight or obese children reducing their measurements from 55.6 to 37.8 percent at one of the schools. The dramatic decrease in BMI demonstrated that the SHCP was effective because of the positive health messages and nutrition concepts taught to the students both at school and at home.

This is encouraging news because childhood obesity is a serious problem. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the percentage of children with obesity in the United States has more than tripled since the 1970s. Currently, about one in five school-aged children is considered obese. There are many factors that can affect rates of childhood obesity, including genetics, epigenetics, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, physical activity, snacking habits, consumption of high calorie foods, and time spent watching television.

However, this new research shows how having access to fruits and vegetables through a garden is linked to reducing obesity as well. This study offers hopeful guidance that effective changes can be made both in schools and at home. Something as simple as gardening can make a notable difference.

How can you add gardening to your child's life?

- Bring the results of this study to the school principal or School Board to lobby for a gardening program at your child's school.
- Volunteer with the Parent Teacher Association to raise money for a school garden.
- Create a family garden in your backyard. You can engage your children in gardening by buying them their own gardening tools, asking them to pick out the types of produce they want to grow, and using the produce you grow to cook meals together.
- Get involved with a community garden in your town.

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