

The Impact of Healthy Food on Education, Behavioral, and Mental Health in Youth



The Children's Home of Cincinnati recently debuted its fruit and salad bar, which offers healthy options to the children served by the agency. For many, obtaining healthy food items at home is a daily challenge.

By Heather Ellison, Chief Strategy Officer
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The Children's Home of Cincinnati recently unveiled its fruit and vegetable bar on our main campus for students who eat their lunchtime meals here with us.

The investment of resources into this new feature was much more involved and deliberate than just offering our students some options at lunch. The science behind food nutrition illustrates that the nutrients found in these kinds of foods aids in brain function, better behavior and even academic test performance.

Unfortunately, for many of our kids a healthy meal away from school isn't as simple as going to the grocery store to stock up on fruits and vegetables. A majority of the students and families we serve are at or below poverty level. Their diet at home often consists of things that are generally more affordable but likely include food that's high in sodium, saturated fats, and preservatives. A diet high in this kind of content is associated with an increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and diabetes as well as impairment of learning ability in the classroom.

There have been numerous academic studies that show the correlation between healthy food choices and cognitive ability, and how both relate to the academic environment. A deficiency in iron, for example, can actually decrease dopamine transmission. This deficiency can often have a negative impact on reasoning, understanding, and thought; all of which are critical assets to have in active learning. Other deficiencies in things like vitamin E, vitamin B, and zinc can also have a negative impact on cognition and concentration.

Malnutrition and a diet high in sugar can also lead to behavioral problems in school and more frequent absences. A balanced diet including protein, complex carbs, and fiber have been shown to improve student behavior and create a more positive learning setting for all students.

A high-quality diet can also influence better outcomes on exams and other performance metrics.

A 2008 study published in Journal of School Health shows that researchers found a better quality diet consistently correlated with higher performance on examinations. A similar study published in American Journal of Diseases of Children concluded comparable results when they showed how programs aimed at increasing the health of students lead to better exam scores.



Another published by the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that students with healthier diets had improved math test scores, were consistently found to be “on task” in accordance with their grade level, and also resulted in more consistent attendance in school.



Food items commonly associated with salads, especially most kinds of leafy greens, contain vitamins A, C, B, and K. Fruits found on salad bars are also good choices for young, developing minds. Apples are high in fiber, vitamins C and K, and potassium. Grapes, blueberries and strawberries are also packed with vitamins and have relatively low glycemic index, so in proper serving quantities they shouldn't cause a significant spike in blood sugar.

The Children's Home of Cincinnati has invested in this culinary and nutrition initiative to give our kids the opportunity to have healthy options at lunchtime. It's another way we are providing comprehensive education, behavioral, and health services to the children and families we serve. There are many ways for you to get involved in this, or other aspects of our mission. Volunteers, monetary donations and in-kind gifts are always welcome and there are few things more rewarding than enriching the life of a vulnerable child. You can learn more by visiting www.thechildrenshomecinti.org.

Heather Ellison is the chief strategy officer for The Children's Home of Cincinnati, where she leads and integrates all aspects of the agency's strategic, quality and evaluation, and risk management initiatives for the 21 distinct programs and services provided by the organization. She oversees a fantastic team who ensures the organization is top-notch, data-driven, safe, and innovative. Since becoming chief strategy officer, Heather has been heavily involved in the execution of the agency's strategic plan and developing new services, including culinary services, that bring hope, help and healing to the more than 10,500 children and families the organization serves every year.

