

Culturally Specific Strong Fast Fit Nutrition Curriculum for Native American Families

The YWCA received support from the TCCDA to develop a nutrition curriculum for Native American youth and families taking part in the Strong Fast Fit Youth program. The Strong Fast Fit program provides culturally-specific wellness education to Latino and Native American youth and their families, focusing on the prevention of obesity and type II diabetes. Youth improve fitness, participate in physical activity twice weekly, and learn to make healthy food choices in the context of their culture. Families improve healthy eating at home through nutrition education.

The curriculum was in development in late 2008 and early 2009, entered the classroom in April 2009, and completed an initial evaluation in July 2009. Families taking part in the program during 2009 were critical partners in the development of the new curriculum through providing ideas and culturally appropriate feedback. As of December 2009, the curriculum has been in use with families for over 6 months.

Prior to April 2009 the Native American component of Strong Fast Fit was using a modified curriculum originally intended for Latino families on an interim basis. The interim curriculum had some success and did teach basic nutrition principles effectively. However, families also reported the classes were boring and involved “too much sitting around.” Staff also reported Native American families were attending nutrition classes at lower rates than Latino families, even among families who were dedicated about attending fitness classes. Addressing these issues and creating a curriculum tailored to the needs and interests of Native American Families was the goal of our project.



The consultant for the project is Rebecca Sanchez, a Registered Dietician. She describes her experiences working with Native American families in some classes while the curriculum was in development:

Participants in the program are very motivated to improve their diet, but often they don't have the tools to do it. On several occasions participants have written down products I've brought in so they would be able to buy healthy alternatives to the foods they were eating. Some did not know the difference between regular and diet soda, and have told me they will now switch. Many participants did not know you could buy Minnesota-grown wild rice in a can – and have now said that they try using this whole grain for quick meals. For one class, I took families on a field trip to the grocery store. Several participants had not used a coupon before - so this was wonderful given our economy and that there are so many coupons available now. Many in that same class also did not know that berries were sold frozen - so we learned about buying fruits/vegetables in season and otherwise looking for frozen or canned. Providing an active hands-on class environment and promoting a healthy diet that includes traditional Native American foods is making a big difference and I am thrilled to have been a part of this work.

The new nutrition curriculum was designed in partnership with the families participating in the program during 2009. Culturally specific elements include:

- 1) The logo design featuring a graphic of the Strong Fast Fit group's choice - an eagle flying and a red/blue color scheme. The curriculum developer originally selected a feather, but the group changed this to reflect their own ideas.
- 2) All classes are designed for interaction; learning is hands-on in Native American culture across all age groups. Every lesson includes hands-on work and most projects were tested and approved by families.
- 3) At the request of the group, lessons include a spiritual component because this is important to healing and wellness in Native culture. This element can be as simple as a few minutes of quiet

reflection or as complex as a ceremony with drums or prayers. The exact nature of spiritual component is non-specific to allow it to vary from the rural to urban Native Americans and across people of different groups or religious affiliations. Spiritual or wellness objectives such as expressing gratitude for healthy food or considering the spiritual implication of unhealthy choices are included for almost every class. Activities such as the food meditation, where participants slowly eat a single bite of food focusing on flavor, texture, nutrition and personal feelings about food are one example. Because the community is spiritually diverse, these elements may not be obviously Native American, but are still very important to successful work in this community. It is assumed that each instructor & group will select a spiritual framework that works for them.

- 4) Recipes used include items like wild rice, fish, venison or game, as well as fresh vegetables that grow in this area. The use of traditional recipes is primarily through the cookbook *River of Recipes* that addresses healthy cooking with commodities, and includes both traditional recipes and modern recipes that are commonly eaten in the Native American community today.
- 5) Portion control is emphasized, as this is the single largest contributor to unhealthy eating patterns in the Native American Community. Classes address "feasts" (or buffets) because for Urban Native American this the most popular way to eat and reflects a valued cultural tradition of community and sharing. However, people eat this way far too often, not just occasionally for special events. It is critical to help participants understand how to handle Feasts socially and culturally. Interactive discussions help participants talk through ways to retain their traditions and community events and also manage their health.
- 6) Reducing soda is addressed often, as this is huge issue in the community, particularly for youth.
- 7) Where appropriate, the curriculum emphasizes the earth, food from the earth, and the healthiness of minerals and vitamins in those foods.
- 8) The curriculum addresses specific health problems in Native Americans including overweight and type II diabetes. These topics are included for culturally specific reasons, but affect everyone, not just the Native American community.
- 9) The curriculum includes a specific class on nutrition careers. Higher education has been a problem for both urban Native American and rural Native Americans, either not graduating or not pursuing further education. The goal is to encourage youth to think about higher education and connect goals for the future with current activities.

It is important to note the most common best-practice in culturally specific programs across all topics, cultural groups, and age groups is hiring staff from the community served and training those staff to deliver curriculum. Our new curriculum is appropriate to the Native American community, but the curriculum alone does not make Strong Fast Fit culturally specific. Staff from the community served are a critical element. They understand details of culture and community that create a safe and welcoming space and make the information relevant to participants. They are also more likely to recognize topics that need additional attention and they have more credibility in delivering the information.

In addition to nutrition education, Strong Fast Fit includes twice weekly fitness classes for youth and a free Family Fitness membership at the YWCA for all participants who meet the attendance expectations of the class. Youth also train for and participate in community fitness events like the Twin Cities Marathon Family events.



Strong Fast Fit Youth runners training to complete 1 mile and 5k events at the Twin Cities Marathon Family Day.

Outcomes (for all youth, both Native American and Latino):

GOAL 1: Curriculum is fully developed and YWCA staff members are trained to offer it

Curriculum completed development in June, the Registered Dietician worked with staff over the summer, and now all staff are fully trained in implementing the curriculum.

GOAL 2: 75% of youth will show measurably improved health (improved or healthy blood pressure, heart rate, BMI, body composition)

In 2009 96 youth participated in programming for at least 6 months and completed sufficient fitness assessments to determine if progress was made. Of these youth, 88% showed measurable improved health.

GOAL 3: 70% of youth will measurably improve diet: Increase water, fruit vegetable intake and lower fat.

83% of youth measurably improved diet base on food logs and reports from youth and parents/caregivers regarding food choices, portion size, etc.

GOAL 4: 60% of families will measurably increase use of meal planning and healthy eating.

80% of families measurably increased the use of meal planning and healthy eating.

Additional Outcomes

During 2009, Strong Fast Fit served Native American 86 youth and their families. As of December, 19 youth had completed the program by participating for 6+ months and 23 remained active and on track to complete. During the second half of the year (July – December) when the finalized curriculum was used in all classes, the Native American component offered 22 nutrition classes (2-5 a month), with an average attendance of 18 at each class. Adults were expected to attend class at least once a month, and they most often brought their children with them when they came. During the six month period, average attendance in nutrition classes increased steadily from about 14 people per class in July and August to about 22 per class in November and December. The addition of this high-quality culturally specific curriculum has had a strong positive impact on the YWCA's ability to effectively serve and support the Native American community and we deeply appreciate the Twin Cities Dietetic Association's support for this work.



Anthony and his mom Pat, with classmate Marshall, making a healthy frozen banana dessert!

A story from the program:

One class that was very successful included a discussion about soda and how the body stores energy. Youth were confused about how an item that contains no fat (soda) could cause your body to store fat. Betty referred to the curriculum section on energy and explained that when you eat and drink, your body is taking in energy it needs to work. Soda contains sugar and sugar has LOTS of energy. When you take in more energy than you need right then, your body does the smart thing: it stores it up to use later! The way your body stores energy is fat. Because we usually have all the food we need, there is never a good time for the body to use up all that stored energy. The result is that it keeps increasing until you have too much fat and it starts making you unhealthy.

Several of the youth expressed that they had not ever realized how soda contributed to weight gain. They had often heard messages that soda was unhealthy, but they never really understood how this could be true, so they had paid no attention. One boy said that now that it had been explained it him in a way that made sense, he could see why it was important to limit soda and only drink it at times when his body really needed the extra energy, like after a big workout, and not as a daily beverage.

Additional resources used in nutrition classes:

River of Recipes

Native American Recipes Using Commodity Foods
USDA Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
(Revision Date: August 2008)
59 double sided pages

Traditional Foods Can Be Healthy

National Institute of Health
National Cancer Institute
Printed September 1996

And a Special Bonus: Quick & Healthy Wild Rice Pumpkin Chili – a class favorite!

1 large white onion
3-4 cloves Fresh Garlic
Olive oil
Chili powder
3 cans or 6 cups prepared wild rice
2 16 oz. cans tomato sauce (low or no sodium)
2 16 oz. cans of chopped tomatoes (low or no sodium)
2 16 oz. cans pumpkin
2 32 oz. cans kidney beans
V8 juice - low sodium kind - 1 bottle 20 oz.
Garlic Powder
Cumin
Pepper

Sauté chopped onion & garlic in olive oil in a large pot. Add chili powder to taste and cook a minute or two to bring up the flavor. Remember, spices can enhance the flavor without overloading on salt, so be a bit generous!

Add rice, tomatoes & sauce, pumpkin and beans and mix thoroughly. Stir in V-8 juice to achieve the desired thickness and heat through.

Add additional spices to taste.

(Note: this makes a big batch – enough for everyone in the class to try some!)