Project Healthy Eating in the Schools of Portalegre County

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ABSTRACT

The main project purpose is to change behaviors and implement healthier eating habits for children and teenagers attending schools with Portalegre county and promoting these changes among their families. The study involved around 2500 children and teenagers, between three and 17 years of age, from the José Régio and Bonfim Schools Grouping . The intervention was structured and targeted three different levels: classroom, school and community. After intervention, changes included: increase of consumption of fruit and vegetables and decrease the amount of high-energy food on their diet. Simultaneously to diet changes, overweight and obesity rates diminished. Teaching the community about healthy eating habits was effective. Similar initiatives should be considered to promote healthy eating habits of children and teenagers. The Project is promoted by the Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation of Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre (C3I), and funded by Riteca II (Network Research Center Border Extremadura and Alentejo), involves the various units of the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre (School of Health, School of Education, School of Technology and Management, School of Agriculture; Social Action Services).





Atelier – Visit to City Market



Atelier – Fruit salad confection



Workshop – parents and children making soups



METHODS

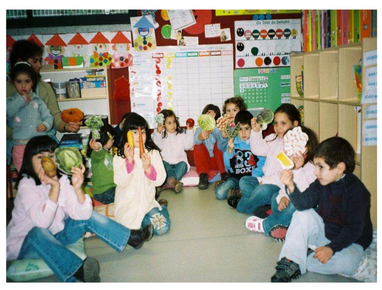
A multi-stage project was developed to evaluate, change and promote healthy eating habits within school community. After an initial characterization of the children population and an assessment of their eating habits, an intervention to promote healthier eating habits was implemented in a group of schools.

In order to promote similar initiatives among the community and extend them to a larger number of schools, intervention was assessed. Outcomes were used to re-direct and establish new strategies (and interventions) to further promote healthy eating habits within schools and community. Different strategies were adopted to target the different groups involved: children, teachers, food suppliers and family/community. The adopted strategies included: school activities, within and outside classrooms; fun and interactive workshops for children (Healthy Eating Atelier); personal development of teachers rising their awareness on the topic; support change among food suppliers to promote healthy eating choices; develop and promote education on healthy eating habits within the community (Newsletter, website, thematic conversations, scientific presentations).

Thematic Conversations "Bread & Olive Oil"



Food Education Session



Conference and Dinner – "Benefits of Healthy Eating"



Chart 1 - Relative frequency of food intake in the 24 hours preceding in Bonfim Schools Grouping (2007 and 2012)

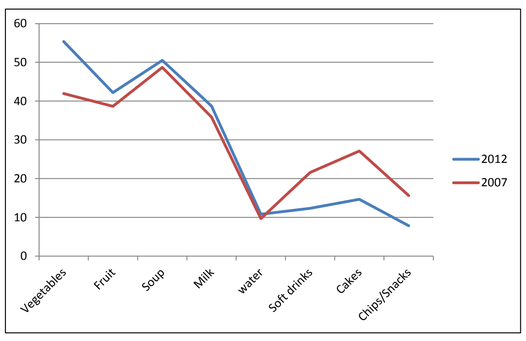
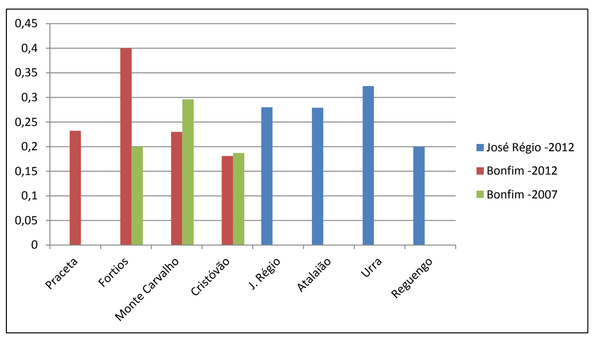


Chart 2 - Overweight and obesity percentage in children and youths by schools of José Régio and Bonfim Schools Groupings in 2012, and Bonfim in 2007



OUTCOMES/DISCUSSION

Up to now, chances indicated improvement on eating habits among children and teenagers. Registered chances included awareness of healthy eating habits; increase consumption of soup, fruit and vegetables with meals; choice of healthier snacks, including milk, bread and fruit and replacement of fizzy drinks by water (Chart 1). The increase of consumption of these aliments ought to further promote replacement aliments with high saturate-fat content, sugar and salt (Gomes,2007). Although, overweight and obesity rates diminished by 0.5% among girls and 0.6% among boys (Chart 2), overweight and obesity were still registered. These children, who were overweight or obese, also showed risk factors of Metabolic syndrome, particularly high waist line (waist line >90). These risk factors are more evident in children from schools where intervention was not implemented. At the same time, bars and canteens from the school where project intervened have adopted and provide healthier food choices. We have also noticed an increase on participation and involvement of parents (or parental guardians) on the activities promoted by this project.

CONCLUSION

This multi-stage project was developed to promote and implement healthier eating habits, and therefore, a better life style, for children and teenagers in school community (José Régio and Bonfim Schools Grouping). The impact assessment of the intervention carried out by the project points out to positive outcomes, both in terms of eating habits of children and youths as in terms of indicators of overweight and obesity.

Although those promising results, some children and teenagers are still overweight or obese, showing abnormal metabolic chances and high risk factors for metabolic syndrome. There is a need to promote healthier eating habits and increase children physical activity.

Similar initiatives to "Project Healthy Eating in the Schools of Portalegre County" should be considered to promote healthy eating habits of children and teenagers.

References

1. CDC. (2011). Healthy Weight: Assessing your Weight: BMI: About BMI for Childrten. Retrieved.
2. Gomes, F. d. S. (2007). Frutas, legumes e verduras: recomendações técnicas versus constructos sociais Rev. Nutr., 20(6).

Partners

The project partners are the Municipality of Portalegre, the Local Health Unit of North Alentejo; the Bonfim and José Régio Schools Groupings.

The project also includes collaboration with other institutions (eg., Hotel and Tourism School of Portalegre, Platform Against Obesity), companies (eg., Delta, Vitalis, Nestlé) and local and national producers.