

Benefits of the Real Kids Real Food Program in an Age of Declining Health

The impact of Real Kids Real Food Program: Investigating lowering youth health in the modern day and intercepting that with the Real Kids Real Food program.

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Abstract: In recent years, the physical health of young children has declined at an alarming rate. Obesity, poor nutrition, myopia, and decreased physical activity have led to long-term health complications, which many kids around the world are suffering from. Real Kids Real Foods actively addresses and revokes these concerns by focusing on plant-based nutrition, hands-on food preparation, physical activity, and environmental sustainability. The program incorporates gardening and mindfulness practices to enhance physical and mental health. Real Kids Real Food has made a significant impact in reversing the decline of youth health, equipping children with essential knowledge and skills to live healthier lives.

I. Declining Youth Health

In recent years, the physical health of young children (ages 3–12 specifically) has declined as a growing concern. Several factors have contributed to this.

The first major concern is obesity. About 19.7% of U.S. Adolescents aged 2-19 from 2017 – March 2020 were considered obese [1], a substantial number of children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). This amounts to about 14.7 million kids. For children aged 6–11 years, obesity rates were nearly as high as 20.7%, during the same period (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Similarly, as of August 2021–August 2023, 40.3% of adults in the United States were obese, according to the CDC. The health effects of obesity extend beyond weight gain; it puts children at risk for developing conditions such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease later in life. In addition, obese children also might experience metabolic dysfunction, which is when their bodies are not able to regulate their body sugar levels properly, which leads to insulin resistance and diabetes. Obesity can also lead

to sleep apnea, which is when children (or anyone) experience disrupted sleep patterns, leading to daytime fatigue, poor concentration, and poor academic performance. The rise in this condition can be attributed to several factors, including the increase in calorie-full foods, ultra-processed foods, and high-sugar foods [2]. Poor dietary habits lie at the core of obesity and malnutrition. Excessive sugar consumption from foods like sodas, fruit juices, and snack food, leads to higher insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome, and cavities [1]. Excessive processed foods can lead to a lack of vitamin D and iron, which are needed for the body to function to its full ability [2]. Poor diet choices also lead to negative cognitive function, which can be the cause of poor attention spans and learning difficulties/challenges. The rise in these foods is derived from these types of foods over more healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables. The easy availability of these types of foods makes it more difficult for families to avoid these types of foods. In addition, fast foods are much more convenient than healthy foods, leading to more incentives to eat these unhealthy foods.

Although children may consume excess calories, many still suffer from malnutrition due to nutrient-deficient diets [2]. This can include deficiencies in iron, vitamin A, and zinc, leading to health complications [2]. For instance, iron deficiency can lead to anemia, resulting in constant fatigue, poor concentration, and increased risk of infections [2]. A lack of vitamin A can cause vision problems and weakened immune systems [2]. Among children who suffer from low income, malnutrition can be more concerning, as they lack access to more expensive nutritious foods. Limited access to expensive nutritious foods (food insecurity) can make it difficult for parents to provide balanced meals to children.

Obesity, combined with malnutrition and poor diets, leads to more chronic diseases that were once considered rare in children. These can include type 2/1 diabetes, high blood pressure, and nonalcoholic fatty liver disease. Once one is infected with type two diabetes, it is irreversible and can haunt the kid for the rest of their life. However, type 2 diabetes is largely preventable through lifestyle changes. Many children also suffer from high cholesterol and hypertension, which increase their risk for cardiovascular disease at an early age. A new growing issue is nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), a condition in which excess fat starts to build up inside the liver, due to poor diet and obesity. Throughout the individual's life, this can lead to liver damage and even liver failure if not addressed promptly. Without proper intervention, children will continue to suffer through these conditions into adulthood, which not only affects their physical health but also their mental health and overall well-being [1].

As stated by the CDC, obesity and lowering youth health can be attributed to a lack of physical activity. Previously, back in the day, children spent much more time outside, playing, doing sports, or other recreational activities. However, modern lifestyle has changed this significantly, with children spending most of their time indoors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). This can be attributed to the vast amount of time spent on electronic devices,

such as television, smartphones, tablets, or video games – all of which reduce the time spent outside. According to the CDC, young children should spend at least 60 minutes outside each day, engaging in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. However, most children fail to meet this recommendation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). A lack of exercise can lead to decreased cardiovascular fitness, reduced muscle development, and an increased risk of obesity and myopia. A lack of motion, in general, can lead to weaker bones, which puts children at greater risk for bone damage (fractures). A lack of sunlight fails to ignite the dopamine in the eyes, which helps regulate the size of the eyeball. Without it, the eye grows without control, which can make it grow too long, leading to myopia (nearsightedness). Spending at least an hour—or two is recommended for most children to reduce the risk of myopia. A study published by JAMA Ophthalmology in 2017 found that increasing outdoor time by 40 minutes per day reduced the risk of myopia in young children [4]. Today, urbanization has reduced safe play areas [5], and many schools have cut back on physical education and outdoor time in favor of academic instruction [6]. A 2013 report found that 44% of schools reduced the time allotted for physical activity due to an increased focus on standardized testing [6]. Once children arrive home, they are often on technology all day, further decreasing physical movement and outside time, with studies showing that children aged 6 to 17 spend an average of four hours per day on mobile phones/devices and gaming systems (again, overall — not person to person. There are several places where sports are normalized) [7]. Many parents today are also unsure about letting kids play unsupervised due to safety reasons, which limits the child's opportunity for outside time if parents are working all day [5].

Overall, a combination of poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and modern lifestyle has given rise to a variety of new health issues/diseases.

II. Introduction to Real Kids Real Food

Real Kids Real Food promotes a healthy lifestyle for children aged 3–12. The program is structured into 4 components [3].

The first component is nutrition education and food preparation. Children are taught the importance of plant-based nutrition, away from meat. In this, they are taught about eating raw foods, which helps to develop your immune system and retain nutrients lost in cooking. In addition, they prepare healthy recipes to understand the nutritional benefits of several ingredients and the power of each ingredient. For nutrition, they learn the power of good foods over bad foods [3].

To combat mental health issues early on, children learn about emotional well-being. Real Kids Real Food incorporates activities such as mindfulness, stress management, and positive body image to boost mental health and create a positive image of the character. They

also discuss aerobic exercises, skits, games, and reflections to foster emotional resilience [3].

Real Kids Real Food also incorporates environmental sustainability into the course, showing how food choices can affect the planet. It teaches them how to act in change in their communities in response to environmental changes [3].

Since its founding in 2008, Real Kids Real Food has positively influenced numerous children and families by raising awareness about nutrition and lifestyle choices. A parent testimonial stated, “My child’s enthusiasm for vegetables skyrocketed after joining Real Kids Real Food. They now love kale chips and even ask for seconds!” (3). Directly from a student, they said “I never knew carrots could taste so good until we grew them ourselves” (3).

The program is led by the remarkable executive director, Betsy Bragg. The program transforms children into healthier versions of themselves. The benefits of participating in Real Kids Real Food are numerous. Children receive essential health education, empowering them to make informed dietary choices. Activities like planting, tending gardens, and cooking deepen their understanding of food sources. The program also emphasizes physical activity, promoting overall well-being. In a fun and supportive environment, emotional health is nurtured alongside physical health [3].

To help the greater good, as well as do its job as a nonprofit, Real Kids Real Food provides free enrollment and delivers recipe ingredients for free to food-insecure families thanks to their generous donations. Their online format allows children worldwide to participate. The brand offers adult classes through Eat to Thrive, covering the same great content as Real Kids Real Food, but from an adult’s perspective to **reverse** more diseases like diabetes and cancer (free for Real Kids Real Food parents) [3].

III. How Real Kids Real Food reverses the decline in Youth Health

One of the biggest concerns with youth health is obesity, which has its roots derived from excessive calorie intake, poor food choices, and insufficient physical activity. To combat this, Real Kids Real Food promotes a plant-based, whole-food nutrition diet, reducing the children’s consumption of high-sugar and ultra-processed foods. In addition to this, the engagement in food preparation, where they learn how to make balanced meals with fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and nutrient-dense ingredients, helps students understand the power of individual healthy foods. This diet references the Mediterranean diet, which has long been proven as the best diet in the world [8]. This diet, which is promoted by Real Kids Real Food, lowers the risk of obesity, as well as prevents metabolic dysfunction, stabilizing insulin levels and reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes. Included in the curriculum is an emphasis on exercise, which encourages movement through small, but important activities, such as yoga, dance, and

outdoor play. This counteracts the modern sedentary lifestyle experienced by many children, and helps meet the CDC's recommended daily outdoor activity levels.

Outside a passive lifestyle and healthy foods is the issue of malnutrition. Real Kids Real Foods tackles this issue by teaching kids about the importance of iron, vitamin D, and other key micronutrients, which prevent conditions, such as anemia and weakened immune function due to malnutrition [3]. They are also taught where these foods come from, so the children know what is healthy.

In addition, children are also taught gardening, where they experience growing and harvesting their vegetables, which helps them learn about food sources, and promotes healthy, natural, organic eating habits at home. As a result, kids are more likely to choose nutrient-dense foods over ultra-processed foods, such as chips, which reverse the poor dietary habits seen by so many kids, and set them up for future health success.

Real Kids Real Food also tackles screen addiction, which leads to no physical activity which leads to a higher risk of high blood pressure, heart disease risk, and myopia. Instead of using digital content/media, children are instructed to do movement-based activities, which can strengthen cardiovascular fitness, improve muscle development, and improve mental health in youth. Taught by Betsy Bragg herself, students are recommended to spend as much time outside as possible and get adequate sunlight. This has been proven to reduce the risk of myopia/reduce *the progression* of myopia in kids. While this only lasts for ten weeks, this consistent action can lead to a habit that the student can continue to do for the rest of their life, creating a lifelong habit/effect.

The program's emphasis on mental/emotional health reverses the negative effects of stress, poor self-image, and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Many kids today face anxiety and self-esteem issues, which are more dangerous and long-lasting than the earlier developed ones (in this case, kids aged 3– 12). Real Kids Real Food helps counteract this by fostering mindfulness, self-confidence, and emotional resilience. Through activities, such as yoga, guided meditation, and group discussions, children learn how to deal with stress constructively, reducing their reliance on unhealthy comfort foods and sedentary behaviors.

IV. Conclusion

The decline in youth health is a serious matter that needs to be taken into hand. However, by addressing poor nutrition, obesity, lack of exercise, and mental well-being, Real Kids Real Food empowers children to take control of their health, and not fall into the marketing schemes of the global economy. The program not only corrects unhealthy habits, but also instills lifelong practices that promote long-term well-being. As more families embrace the power of Real Kids

Real Foods, the potential to save the youth health crisis grows stronger year after year, all through a free 10-week transformative program.

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