BACKGROUNDER:
THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY EATING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Canadian children and adolescents are increasingly at risk for foodu related problems. Research shows a strong correlation between healthy eating habits in children and proper physical and cognitive development, success in school, and a lowered risk of chronic diseases in adulthood.[1] Increasingly, however, Canadian children are consuming unhealthy diets, putting them at risk for poor development, lower academic propensity, and chronic diseases later in life.

Food insecurity, poor health in children and teens, and unhealthy food environments, three of the most pressing and interrelated issues affecting youth, must be addressed urgently. Research shows that communityu based food programs that offer handsu on food education and skills are effective interventions for children, youth, and their families.

Children and food insecurity

Food insecurity in Canada is increasing and is disproportionately affecting youth. Four million Canadians suffer from food insecurity, 1.15 million of them children,[2] who have been shown to be more vulnerable to food insecurity. Nearly one in six children in Canada live in households that experience food insecurity.[3] A report on Toronto food banks found that nearly one third of all food bank clients are 18 and under.[4] Nationwide, households with children have higher rates of food insecurity than the general population.[5,6] Femaleu headed single parent households are the most vulnerable, with more than 34 per cent of these households experiencing food insecurity.[7]

The effects of food insecurity and hunger on children are well documented. Children who live with food insecurity are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and conditions such as asthma[8] and iron deficiency anemia.[9] They are also more likely to experience mental health problems,[10] including anxiety and depression,[11] and more likely to have trouble concentrating in school[12] and to exhibit behavioural problems[13]. A survey of people who experienced food insecurity in the Greater Toronto Area found that

children whose families rely on food banks experienced feelings of embarrassment and anger.[14] Addressing food insecurity can play an important role in reducing the burden of poor mental health on children and their families and reducing social inequalities in child and youth development.[15]

The health and economic costs of unhealthy childhood body weights

A great deal of research around childhood and long-term health has been focused on the effects of unhealthy body weights. Rates of childhood and adolescent overweight and obesity have nearly tripled in the last three decades.[16] Childhood obesity has been deemed an epidemic by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health:[17] almost one third of Canadian children from five to 18 were considered overweight or obese as of 2015.[18]

Obese children are increasingly being diagnosed with health problems previously seen nearly exclusively in adults:[19] possible complications are numerous and include type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, respiratory problems, and psychological issues related to bullying and feelings of isolation.[20] Furthermore, obese youth are more likely to engage in other unhealthy behaviours, such as drinking and smoking.[21]

As obese children are likely to remain obese into adulthood, childhood obesity is a serious public health issue. Adult obesity leads to further health problems, such as stroke, cancer, and heart disease: statistically, a 40-year-old obese person will die seven years earlier than a counterpart of a healthy weight.[22] The obesity epidemic is so dire that for the first time, the current generation of children may not live as long as their parents.[23]

Unhealthy weights can also cause significant psychological harm, particularly during adolescence. Adolescence is the period of life accompanied with the most extensive physical development, which puts teens at risk for body dissatisfaction and a range of eating disorders and other psychological issues.[24] One recent study found that body dissatisfaction may be the biggest cause of depression in overweight adolescents.[25] Body dissatisfaction and associated weight-loss efforts are correlated with obesity.[26]

Childhood obesity and poor health increase in populations of lower socioeconomic status,[27] placing the brunt of this problem on the shoulders of disenfranchised communities. Obesity is higher, for example, in Indigenous communities than in non-Indigenous communities.[28] According to researchers, the elevated risk of obesity and diet-related chronic illness seen among Indigenous peoples in Canada today is likely to be partially attributable to the prolonged hunger and malnutrition experienced by many residential school survivors.[29]

This epidemic is becoming increasingly costly and is putting significant pressure on the health care system. Obesity costs Canadians up to $7.1 billion a year in direct health care costs and indirect costs

such as loss of productivity.[30] One study of Canadian children suggests health care costs are 21 per cent higher for obese children than for children within a healthy weight range.[31] This evidence makes a clear case for innovative and evidenceu informed interventions.

The home food environment, parental influence, and food skills development

Overweight and obese parents are also a significant risk factor for overweight children, and the home food environment plays a crucial role in child food preference and eating habits. What types of food and how much is made available in the home can positively or negatively affect healthy eating habits from a very young age.[32] Research shows that eating habits developed at a young age continue into adulthood, though they are susceptible to change during adolescence.[33]

Having a poor diet is a key driver of childhood obesity and its associated health risks. Many surveys have found that Canadian children are not, on average, consuming the number of servings of nutritious foods recommended by Canada's Food Guide.[34] The Canadian Community Health Survey shows that 22 per cent of calories consumed by Canadian children aged four to 18 do not fall under any of the categories of Canada's Food Guide.[35] Consumption of ultra-processed foods is also on the rise, and has climbed significantly since the 1980s.[36] Consumption rates are high across all socioeconomic groups, and highest among young people, with children and youth, from aged two to 18, getting more than half of their calories from ultra-processed foods. [37]Higher levels of ultra-processed food intake are linked to chronic disease and obesity.[38]

One of the contributors to unhealthy eating habits in kids is targeted food marketing. Evidence shows that food advertisements influence children's food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns, and contribute to childhood obesity levels. [39,40] The average Canadian child views eight to ten food and beverage advertisements per day on television and over 25 million online per year.[41] Close to 90 per cent of these advertisements are marketing unhealthy foods, mostly processed foods high in sugar, fat and salt.[42] Children must thus be exposed to healthy food environments and be taught healthy food skills to combat this influence.

Adequate and self-sufficient cooking and food preparation skills have been identified as barriers to food choice and dietary quality by parents.[43] The loss of food preparation skills is increasing and is leading Canadians to eat more pre-prepared foods and take-out in lieu of cooking with whole foods.[44] Canadian children are thus losing opportunities to learn food skills.[45] This significantly impacts health as there is a correlation between the frequency of adolescents' participation in food preparation and the quality of their diets.[46] This problem continues into adulthood: one American study of young adults aged 19 to 23 found that most did not engage in food preparation on a weekly basis.[47]

Health impacts of inadequate food skills disproportionately affect disenfranchised populations. Research has found a correlation between cooking skills and food security in Canadian families.[48] A 2010 Australian study suggests lack of confidence and poor cooking skills contribute to lower fruit and vegetable intake in groups of low socioeconomic status.[49]

Healthy food access, variety, and choice in the home food environment can be influenced by the level of food knowledge, food skills confidence, healthy eating habits, and the financial means of parents. Food knowledge and skills programs for parents have the potential to positively affect the health of their children in the long-term.

Community-based Interventions

Addressing childhood obesity was announced as a pan-Canadian priority by the Public Health Association of Canada (PHAC), which put forward a federal, provincial, and territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights.[50] Similarly, the Government of Ontario has identified tackling child poverty, a significant contributor to child food insecurity, as a top priority in its Poverty Reduction Strategy.[51] PHAC identifies the need "to create environments that make the healthy choice the easy choice for healthy eating and physical activity and, to promote opportunities for individuals, families and communities to take action and adopt positive behaviour changes by increasing physical activity and improving healthy eating."[52] This Framework recognizes NGOs and communities as vital actors in creating healthy environments. Community-based after-school programs have also been identified by Health Canada as beneficial for encouraging healthy eating in children.[53]

Research shows that community-based programs are effective at combatting youth obesity. Studies suggest that community-based approaches to increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among children and teens are effective and have had success in improving food literacy,[54] which is vital considering the fact that low fruit and vegetable consumption among youth is linked with childhood obesity and future health problems.[55] One cause of youth obesity is a lack of food skills,[56] which have also found to be lacking in food insecure youth.[57] Researchers suggest incorporating culinary skills in obesity prevention programs.[58] Cooking classes have been found to increase children's willingness to try new foods, their confidence in the kitchen and food preparation skills, and their consumption of fruits and vegetables post-intervention.[59] Community-based programs with multiple components have found success with hands-on approaches, such as teaching children cooking and gardening skills.[60]

Several studies demonstrate the importance of addressing diet and obesity issues at an early age. The development of healthy eating habits in the early stages of life has been shown to decrease the risk of diet-related diseases.[61] Youth have an increased capacity for learning to develop new habits during this period of their lives.[62] One potential reason behind the success of community-based approaches is the presence of other youth. Researchers have suggested that the efficacy of interventions can be strengthened with the inclusion of peers.[63] Friends are crucial to development in adolescents, and teens' health behaviour is often similar to that of their peers.[64] This underlines the importance of providing community-based interventions.

Right To Food's theory of change

Healthy food skills, knowledge and attitudes are key to promoting healthier eating habits among both children and adults. Community Food Centres and other community food organizations offer hands-on cooking and gardening programs that help people build the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to feed themselves a healthy diet and that empower people to take as much control over their personal health and nutrition as possible within the context of their circumstances. Greater self-efficacy and confidence in the kitchen and garden combined with healthy food knowledge and skills can improve the quality of one's diet.

Community food organizations offer much-needed services, supports and programs, only government policies addressing income security, housing, health, agriculture and other underlying issues can affect widespread change. Government has an important role to play in solving the problems of food insecurity and poverty, diet-related illness and our unsustainable food system at scale.

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