

A study of

FOOD LITERACY

...among youth, young pregnant women and young parents who are at risk for poor health



WHAT WE WANTED TO KNOW

1. What does food preparation mean to these groups?
How do they feel about it?
2. What types of foods can they prepare?
What do they commonly prepare?
3. How are they learning food skills?
What do they want to learn?
4. What challenges do they face with preparing food?
What strategies do they use?
5. What types of supports would help?

A Locally Driven Collaborative Project with health professionals from eight Public Health Units in Ontario

In-depth interviews with 85 young people, 16 to 25 years of age, in a mix of rural, urban and Northern places including:

- Chatham-Kent
- City of Hamilton
- City of Kawartha Lakes
- London
- Northumberland County
- Sudbury & District
- Waterloo
- Windsor-Essex County

WHY THIS MATTERS

In our current food environment where processed convenience foods are readily available, expensive and often unhealthy, becoming food literate is a life skill that enhances resilience. Through youth and new parents, we have an opportunity to begin to influence a new generation of healthy eating.

WHAT IS FOOD LITERACY

- It is a set of skills and attributes that help people sustain the daily preparation of healthy, tasty, affordable meals for themselves and their families.
- It builds resilience, because it includes food skills (techniques, knowledge and planning ability), the confidence to improvise and problem-solve, and the ability to access and share information.
- It requires external support with healthy food access and living conditions, broad learning opportunities and positive socio-cultural environments.

“So if you learn how to make stuff from basically nothing, like just make it from different stuff that you have around the house, then you have something to eat.”
-Steve, age 18



“Before, I was living with a lot of other people and I cooked and baked for them. But it’s harder to cook for yourself than for fourteen people. I do like cooking, just not for myself.”
-Sadie, age 18



WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- The range of food skills among these young people is broad and evolves over time. They are motivated to prepare food because of factors that include:
 - Cost, taste, personal health, child health, independence, pleasure, and creativity
- Preferred ways of learning:
 - Direct experiential learning
 - School-based opportunities
 - Community cooking programs
- The most common reason for preparing their own food was “knowing what’s in it”
- Recipes and online learning were not a substitution for hands-on opportunities
- Many young people never used recipes and valued the ability to improvise
- Preparing food for others or with their children was a source of pride and satisfaction
- Confidence in the kitchen was higher among those who learned earlier in life

WHAT DID THEY TELL US?

Food preparation is an important life skill for everyone. However, what they knew how to make and what they actually prepared on a daily basis depended on personal and environmental factors:

Food Preparation Skills & Experience

- Ability to use food preparation utensils, appliances
- Ability to use recipes and follow instructions
- Ability to improvise with ingredients

Organizational Skills & Experience

- Planning
- Budgeting
- Buying and storing food

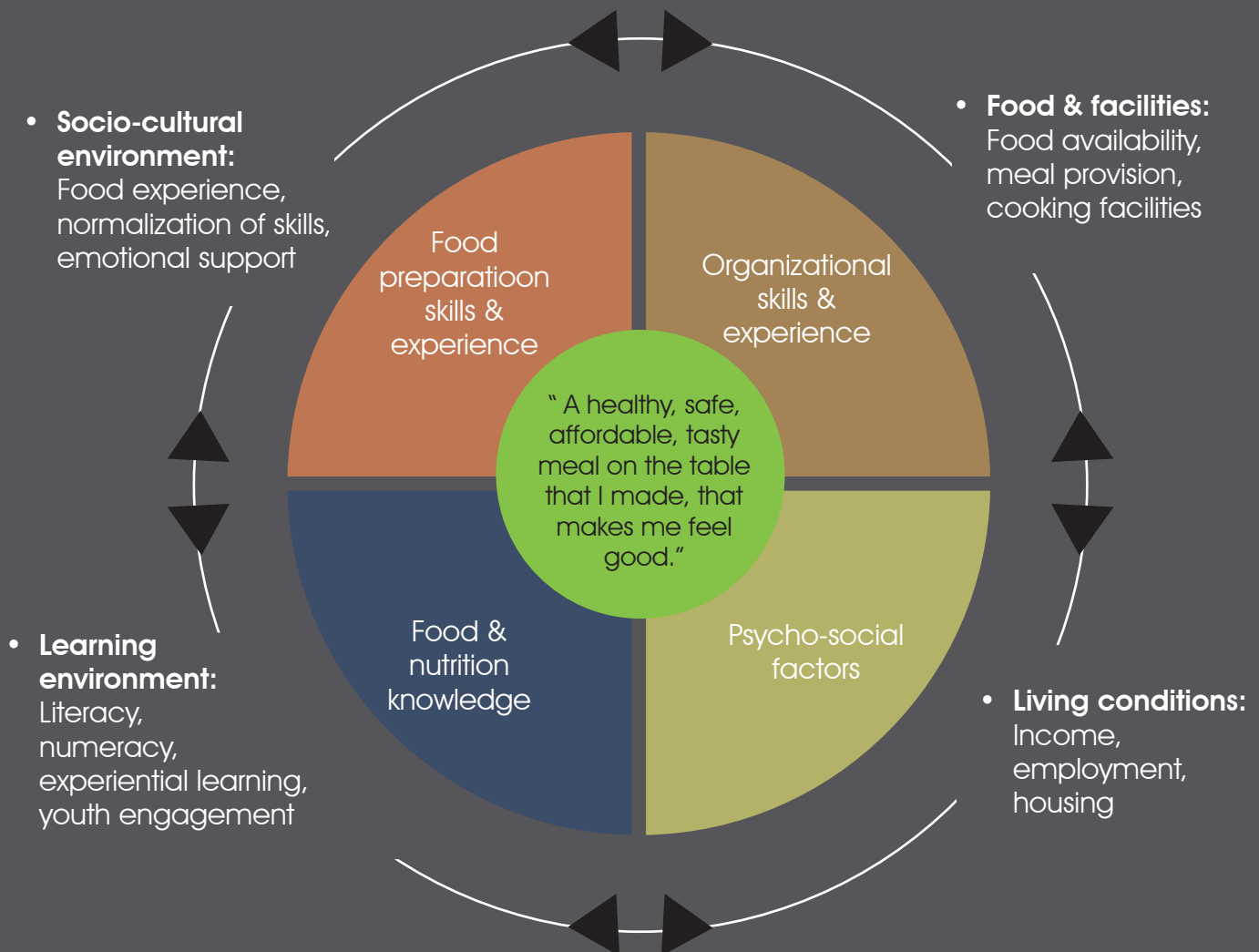
Food & Nutrition & Knowledge

- Knowledge about food, nutrition, food safety
- Interpreting food labels, where to find information
- Where food comes from

Psycho-Social Factors

- Satisfaction, creativity, social connectedness (eating together, transferring skills), feeling healthy
- Resilience, self-efficacy, confidence, control, household food security

WHAT DETERMINES FOOD LITERACY?



PROMISING PRACTICES:

- Community Food Advisors or Peer Nutrition Programs
- Food Hubs or Centres

Opportunities to incorporate food literacy into existing programs:

- Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program
- Healthy Babies, Healthy Children
- Student involvement in food preparation in cafeterias and student nutrition programs
- Ontario school curriculum
- Before and after school programs
- Good Food Box programs
- Community gardens
- Community kitchens

"I took a foods class at school for two years and then when I was pregnant, Building Healthy Babies used to do cooking classes so I learned stuff there. That was good because I realized I had to cook for myself so I might as well learn. It's just like you learned how to walk and you walk for the rest of your life. So if you are taught in simple ways that's easy to remember, patterns of how you do things like how you cut onions and tomatoes – like I showed my sister how to do it and now she has no problem to do it."
– Anya, age 21, 3 children

"When I move out is when I'm starting to cook on my own. My dad always kind of like showed me, but no -- I've never tried anything. So now I found this little apartment and I figure I have only \$150 for food each month, and like I'm scared, man. Like I was just starting to do my budgeting thing, and I'm going to go out shopping for food, and I need some pots and pans too."
- Jay, age 17

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Public health units have an important role in building community capacity for food literacy programs and partnerships.
- Incorporate food literacy into the school system:
 - Curriculum and classroom
 - Before and after programs
 - Community use of schools
- Increase the number of community programs with a cooking component, in both rural and urban areas.
- Train teachers and food skills facilitators to combine food literacy programs with resiliency building.
- Encourage parents/teachers to involve children in age-appropriate food preparation from a young age.
- Advocate for affordable housing with functional kitchens, and increased access to healthy food.
- Create programs that build job skills e.g., incubator kitchens, culinary training, food service, catering, safe food handler courses.
- Advocate for adequate program funding and appropriate kitchen facilities in community settings.

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