



October Snapshots

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Eatable Alphabet helps children build confidence with healthy foods

For many young children, trying a new fruit or vegetable can feel intimidating. Research shows that repeated exposure to healthy foods during early childhood helps shape eating habits, food preferences, and nutrition knowledge that can last a lifetime. Through the Eatable Alphabet program, local families are discovering that learning about healthy foods can be fun, engaging, and hands-on.

The Eatable Alphabet curriculum combines literacy, food exploration, sensory learning, and simple food preparation activities to introduce children to fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods from A to Z. Lessons encourage children to touch, smell, taste, prepare, and talk about foods while building early literacy and learning skills.

Locally, the program began as a pilot initiative through partnerships involving OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois, the University of Illinois College of Medicine, and community partners. Working alongside pediatric leaders, healthcare professionals, and educators, University of Illinois Extension helped support the development and implementation of lesson materials designed to increase food literacy among preschool-aged children. The curriculum has also been adapted for use with special education and life skills classrooms at Pekin High School, creating opportunities for older youth with disabilities to explore new foods, build food preparation skills, and gain confidence through hands-on nutrition experiences.

"The kids get excited to try new things," shared Extension Health & Community Wellness Advisor Julie Dantone. "They love talking about the foods they taste and are eager to share their experiences with family members and classmates. The hands-on activities help build curiosity and excitement around healthy foods."

Early program evaluation found promising results. Following participation in the Eatable Alphabet curriculum, children demonstrated improvements in recognizing letters and identifying foods. Children were twice as likely to correctly identify featured letters and more than twice as likely to report trying featured foods after participating in the program. Teachers also reported high satisfaction with the lessons and found them enjoyable, age-appropriate, and educational.



Julie Dantone, health and community wellness advisor, recently taught a group of preschoolers A is for Apple in the Eatable Alphabet curriculum. The program began through a partnership with U of I College of Medicine Peoria and OSF Children's Hospital. It combines literacy, food exploration, sensory learning, and simple food preparation activities to introduce children to fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods.

Photo by Anita Wilkinson, Illinois Extension

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