

The school canteen facilities: an instrument for the Mediterranean nutrition education

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The school canteens are an important mean for the education and well-being promotion addressed to children, that involve teachers and parents as well; for this reason they should not be considered as a mere fulfillment of the nutritional needs.

Considering the complexity of the structures involved, the kind of consumers and the possible consequences of related and incidental pathological events, the importance of the canteen facilities stands clear with respect to a health and social program focused to the development of a correct feeding aimed to assure, at the same time, food safety and nutritional quality.

The situation of school canteens is different: in Italy, for instance, the canteens for nursery schools, pre-schools, primary and secondary schools pertain to the Municipal Authorities. Considering the huge number of municipalities, more than 8,000 where, per each town, there is at least one school, the services are rather disjointed and unorganized.

The refectories can be directly managed by the municipalities themselves, or can be assigned to one or more external companies contracted with a tender; finally, some refectories can be managed by the local authority together with a contract company, i.e., a mixed management. On the basis of the data provided by *Bio Bank* (2010), the contract system is largely diffused, as it is chosen by 74 % of the canteens (6), whereas 15 % choose the direct management and only 9 % the mixed system.

The epidemiological characteristics related to the nutritional status and the lifestyles of the samples of school

population are surveyed with the monitoring of national or international projects.

The National Guidelines for school canteen facilities are suggested by the need to facilitate, since the early childhood, the adoption of correct eating habits in order to promote a healthy well-being and to prevent chronic and degenerative diseases (like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, osteoporosis, etc.) where a wrong diet represents one of the main risk factors.

On the other hand, the radical lifestyle changes of families and individuals have brought to the need of having at least one meal outside, using the available food services.

It is well-known that the promotion of a correct and healthful lifestyle is the primary target, even at the international level.

The access and the practice of a healthful diet is one of the fundamental rights to achieve the highest attainable standard of health, particularly in the first years of one's life.

The “Convention of the Childhood rights”, held in 1989 by the UN, ratified the right of the child of having a healthful and appropriate diet in order to achieve the highest attainable standard of health and the “European Social Charter”, reviewed in 1996, stated that “every human being has the right to benefit from any measures that enable him to achieve the best level of good health obtainable”.

In 2006, The WHO (World Health Organization) Regional Office for Europe approved the “Gaining health Program”, that provided a multi-sectorial strategy aimed at the prevention and control of the chronic disease. At the end of 2007, the WHO, together with the European Commission and 27 State Members of the Union, adopted the declaration about “The health in every policy”, as to promote the development and implementation of policies

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in favor of a good health within different sectors such as feeding, environment, trading, education, industry, labor and transport. The success of many interventions for the promotion of health depends, in fact, on elements not related to the “Health Care System”.

Following this strategy, in 2007 the program “Guadagnare Salute—rendere facili le scelte alimentari” (Gaining Health—making food choice easier) was started, as a global strategy addressed to promote healthful lifestyles and to reduce chronic non-communicable diseases; this program, designed by the Ministry of Health, aimed to reduce the risk factors such as poor diet, physical inactivity, alcohol addiction and smoking. Among the areas of intervention, the food services, and in particular the school canteens, were identified as priority instruments for promoting a healthful well-being model and for training a correct diet.

In school refectories, it is crucial to improve the quality level of the meals, such as the nutritional and the sensory quality, firmly maintaining the principles of food safety as well. The correct management can help the choice of the right food through the assessment of suitable menus and the promotion of some dishes/recipes. Besides producing and distributing dishes in accordance with the LARN guidelines, i.e., the recommended daily allowances of nutrients for the Italian population, this correct management can play an important role in nutrition education involving children, families and teachers.

Teachers and non-teacher employees, duly trained (about the principles of nutrition, the importance of the senses in food choice, the methods of communication eligible for the children to a varied consumption of food, the importance of proper preparation and portioning of the dishes) could support the enrichment of homemade food of new flavors, calmly managing the first difficulties of some children who have never eaten or tested them before.

The school feeding system has dramatically changed in the last 20 years, assuming, in the conceptual model of local authorities and sector staff, connotations of organic unity with the awareness of the complexity of its

- hygienic and nutritional profiles;
- gastronomic and of reception;
- economic and financial;
- administrative and managerial ones;
- means of communication; and
- easing of healthy eating habits in an effective model of health promotion and prevention of chronic-degenerative diseases and their related risk factors.

The school canteens should not be seen exclusively as a simple fulfillment of nutritional needs, but they should be considered an important and continuous training and promotion for the good health of the children involving, at the same time, teachers and parents.

These goals can be briefly summarized as follows:

- promotion of healthy eating habits;
- safety and rule compliance; and
- appropriateness towards needs, not only in terms of nutritional characteristics of food suggestions and recipes, cooking technologies and foodstuffs but also in terms of sensory liking;
- respect of timing and serving procedure, of comfort and availability service;
- appropriate quality—price ratio; and
- consumers satisfaction.

Inside the restoration system, the model above defined involves new and integrated skills and requires investment in training professionals who should have specific techniques as well as managerial skills with an overview of the critical state of the system and the relevant know-how.

The protagonists who have the competence of the school canteens are:

- The client (Municipality, Public or Private School);
- Service manager;
- Local Health Authority;
- Consumers (children and their families); and
- Educational Institutions.

The cooperation is therefore crucial in consideration of a step-by-step eating education improvement of the children and their families.

Basic models of diet schedule, designed according to the local realities and their possible changes, must contain valid nutritional messages, meeting the RDAs and the standard of satisfaction adjusted to the collective dimension.

Since the primary goal is to ensure school dishes of nutritional quality, nutrients availability and sanitary safety in a sensory pleasantness setting, the choices motivated by technical and theoretic aspects should be integrated by the common sense, on the basis that the feeding program proposed for the basic model has a strong educational value.

A balanced and correct diet, as well as palatable and acceptable, is for everybody a primary requirement for the maintenance of a good health state and, especially in children, for an optimum growth.

At school, the correct feeding has the task to teach the children healthful eating habits and behaviors.

The child feeding should be considered in a broader context, such as the environment, not only in the physical sense but also in the socio-cultural and psychological one.

At school, the child learns to sit at the table, eating the dish of the day without any wasting and appreciating new flavors, sometimes unusual; the seasons allow to offer varied dishes that, due to different tastes, behaviors and

maybe lack of time, cannot not be consumed at home. The introduction of new foods can be easily accepted if the possible initial refusal is overcome, thanks to the collaboration of teachers and/or non-teacher staff that stimulate the child to the spirit of imitation towards his companions.

The menu must be conceived according to the principles of a balanced diet from the nutritional viewpoint, using also typical food in order to teach children the preservation of food traditions.

As stated by the INRAN (*Instituto Nazionale di Ricerca per gli Alimenti Nutrizione*, National Institute for Food and Nutrition Research) guidelines for a healthful diet, the variety is essential, as it allows an intake of nutrients that fits for a harmonic growth and essentially contributes to the spread of healthful eating habits.

The menu should turn every 4/5 weeks, as not to repeat the same recipe almost ever, and should be different between the autumn–winter and spring–summer periods.

Italy is becoming more and more a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nation and the presence of students from other ethnic groups is a structural reality in our school system.

Among the cultural identities, there appear eating habits that are peculiar of different areas of the world in relation to socio-economic status, history, religious beliefs, availability of different raw materials and traditions of different peoples. The model followed in Italy can be a useful guide for all the Mediterranean countries and the task of our magazine is to promote these educational models supporting the Mediterranean lifestyle.

Web sites and references

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