

CHILD NUTRITION



THE NATURE OF LIFE IS TO GROW...

"My research shows that children will eat up to 20 times more low-fat, high fiber foods if they first learn about them through hands-on experience in the classroom."

- Antonia Demas, PhD
Award-winning Educator



From New York City to Sante Fe, school children of all ages are learning about food and nutrition in an innovative wholistic way, thanks to the creative curriculum of one masterful teacher, Antonia Demas, PhD. She's got kids eating collards, black-eyed peas, beans, squash, couscous and curry!

Her curriculum, in part, involves engaging children's senses in the process of teaching about foods — what Demas calls "sensual education". For example, identifying and smelling the aroma of fresh herbs before using them in cooking, and feeling the stickiness of butter and relating that to how arteries can become clogged.

Additionally, associations of food with other cultures as well as other subjects like math, science, geography and art are also integrated into the whole process. Cooking plays a part as well. "Children usually reject low-fat versions of foods they're used to, but by involving the students in preparing healthful, international food in the classroom, and teaching them about nutrition through the study of other cultures, food and cooking, the children accept these foods and even ask their families to prepare them," said Demas. This year students will grow beans, herbs and greens in school gardens to illustrate the food cycle.

Even Dr. Benjamin Spock has endorsed Demas' curriculum. Cornell anthropology professor Robert Ascher states, "Antonia's work helps children appreciate and respect people from other cultures all over the world..." And Charles Attwood, author of *Dr. Attwood's Low-Fat Prescription for Kids*, says, "This unique program, created by Dr. Demas, has the potential of changing the health destiny of an entire generation of children. I've seen nothing like this in my 32 years as a pediatrician."

Demas' curriculum, originally developed as part of her 1995 doctoral thesis, has received national recognition. The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded her the *Most Creative Implementation of the Dietary Guidelines Award* last year, and she's also received the Society for Nutrition Education *Excellence in Nutrition Education Award*.

I had an opportunity to interview Antonia Demas this month and ask her about her views on nourishing children these days. This special interview appears on page 3.

by Jeanna Rosten

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■ An AWARD-WINNING EDUCATOR :

INTERVIEW

with *Antonia Demas, PhD*
Cornell University



CN: You mentioned that in one of your current schools in New York City, there is a Pre-K program where your curriculum is being used. Can you say a little bit about what's going on there?

AD: The children learn about and cook the new foods in their classroom with their peers. In NYC, the children learn about a new food every week. The new food is related to all of the disciplines. For example, when lentils were introduced, they were used for counting, bean bags were made in art, and science experiments were done by comparing cooking times of soaked and raw lentils. They were also sprouted. The pre-K class currently is growing herbs for a restaurant as well as for their own use.

The school in Rochester that I am working with also includes a pre-K. This school is for emotionally disturbed children who cannot be mainstreamed. They are cooking once each month with their classroom teacher (my curriculum) and relating the food to the disciplines. The new food is then served in the school lunch program.

Children first learn about the world through their senses & are receptive to sensual education...

CN: There seems to be a "wholeness" in what you're doing: Integrating nutrition with basic gardening, connecting food to other subjects like science, art, math, and involving kids in the preparation of food in the classroom. Do you find that this is the key to success?

AD: Yes. Children are able to see the connections that food has to all aspects of life. This makes learning meaningful. Another key element is that this approach is

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experiential and engages all of the senses. Children first learn about the world through their senses and are receptive to sensual education.

CN: What do you see as the most serious nutritional problem facing American children today?

AD: Families are not cooking meals in the same way that they did in the past. Our modern lives have become too hectic so that many people eat out or resort to convenience foods. In addition, children watch way too much TV. The combination of junk foods and inactivity is deadly.

When children have hands-on positive interactions with foods, they will eat foods that adults would never believe...

CN: Do you have any advice on what can be done to antidote the "attraction to sugar" that kids have?

AD: When children have hands-on positive interactions with a variety of foods, they will eat foods that adults would never believe they would eat. The problem lies with adults and our perception about children. Children are extremely capable.

We make assumptions about children that are not correct. For example, we put a plate of brussel sprouts in front of a child and tell them to eat the brussel sprouts "because they are good for you." When the child rejects the brussel sprout, we assume that they are unadventurous eaters. But it is rational for the child to reject a food when they know nothing about it and it is unfamiliar. If we show the child how brussel sprouts are grown, tell them the history and lore of the brussel sprout, have the child cook the brussel sprout, then they will likely eat it.

We owe it to our children to teach them about food. Food is important on many levels related to health and education. Food can serve as preventive medicine. Food is an exciting vehicle to learn about the world. In addition, teaching children how to cook teaches them how to take care of themselves on a very basic level. The advertising media has done a good job in making unhealthy foods appealing to children. Schools can and should teach children to be critical thinkers. Food needs to be in the curriculum so that children will be able to make educated decisions about this fundamental need. ■