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Food expert cuts through the hype

by VIKKI HOPES
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TEACHING CHILDREN about nutrition can go a long way to reducing crime and easing the burden on the medical system, says a health expert visiting Abbotsford next week.

Dr. Antonia Demas, a renowned nutrition expert based in Trumansburg, New York, presents two free workshops next week from her *Food is Elementary* program. It is the first time she has hosted the sessions in Canada.

Demas is recognized by well known health professionals such as Dean Ornish for her innovative approach to children's nutrition education.

"I admire the work of Dr. Antonia Demas, who is a pioneer in improving the nutrition of children," Ornish has said.

Demas has worked with schools in the United States and with troubled youth to change their attitudes about food. Her focus is on a plant-based, nutrient-rich diet no higher than 30 per cent fat.

The results have been phenomenal, she said. In one school where she worked with delinquent youth, a change in diet corresponded with an improvement



continued with an improvement in behaviour, better grades and positive health changes, including more energy.

"These kids never thought before about food having any effect on anything...but once they learned about food and nutrition, it really changed their lives," she said.

The students were required to plan and cook their own meals, based on what they had learned during instructional sessions with Demas.

After completing the program, nine of the students received scholarships to attend a culinary arts school.

"I think that's a neat success story because these are boys that had very shady futures to face," Demas said.

She said ridding the body of junk food and replacing it with healthier options results in a sharper mind, a more positive attitude and the ability to make better choices in life.

"We really are what we eat. When you eat junk, you behave like junk," she said.

Demas is also motivated by the increase in heart disease, obesity, diabetes and other ailments that are hitting people at an increasingly earlier age. Teaching children about nutrition can save billions of medical dollars down the road as they learn preventive



ROBERT GRANT PHOTO

Dr. Antonia Demas shows the value of healthy eating during her Food is Elementary program. She visits Abbotsford for two sessions next week.

measures to protect their health, she said.

The challenge is in getting the message across to children whose parents are often too busy to make home-cooked meals and often uninformed about smart nutrition choices themselves. Factor in the

easy and plentiful access to junk food, and it can be even more difficult to get kids to listen up.

Demas does it by making food a fun, sensory experience, she said.

One of her favourite activities during her workshops is to give children a white plate and tell them to pretend it's a canvas.

"I tell them they're going to create something beautiful on this canvas and at the end they're going to eat it," she said. "It's a

way to really see food and enjoy it."

Demas connects the colours of food with their nutritional components, encouraging children to opt for a variety of colour on their plates.

She also teaches them how to cook and serve tasteful meals that will entice them to try new foods, such as tofu, couscous and lentils.

Demas also gives kids the facts about junk food, such as the pop they can find in their school vending machines.

"When kids realize how corrosive sodas are and that they're empty calories, and when they realize what goes into fast food places...they understand what they're eating and it becomes less

"When you eat junk, you behave like junk."

— Dr. Antonia Demas, noted nutrition expert

appealing," she said.

Demas said children are famous for taking these messages home and sharing their knowledge with their parents.

That's why schools need to play a more active role in teaching and encouraging good nutrition, she said.

"They're in an ideal place to teach kids early on about nutrition," she said.

Demas has developed a curriculum that is being used by many schools in the U.S. The lessons incorporate geography, culture, mathematics and science.

Demas said the payoffs are more attentive students, a decrease in behavioural problems and a generation that can take steps towards chronic-disease prevention.

"I want them to understand the relationship between diet and

disease and that the eating habits they form as children are going to have lifelong effects," she said.

Demas' presentations in Abbotsford take place Wednesday, July 31 and Thursday, Aug. 1 at W. J. Mouat secondary (32355 Mouat Drive). They begin at 7:30 p.m. Parents, teachers and kids are invited to attend.

The first workshop is called *Why Food-based Education in Home and School is so Vital Today*. The second session, called *Food is Elementary in Action*, involves children in hands-on food preparation.

The free sessions are sponsored by the Coronary Health Improvement Project (CHIP) and Abbotsford's new Silver Hills Bakery. A free-will offering will be taken. Registration is not required. For more information, call the CHIP line at 604-853-7102.