

# helps low-income families improve diets

Gaylord P. Whitlock



**Dorothy Wheeler (left), San Diego County home advisor, and program assistant Nita Steele review EFNEP teaching materials, which explain food preparation and preservation as well as the basics of nutrition. Many are available in both Spanish and English.**

**T**he Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) has proved to be a remarkable success in the seven years it has been in operation in California. EFNEP was set up as a joint effort of the federal, state, and county governments to help families acquire knowledge and skills to improve the nutritional quality and adequacy of their diets. The program focuses on families living in poverty or near poverty, especially those with young children.

Some 380,000 individuals in low-income families have been involved, out of a potential target population of 1,750,000. When they were enrolled in the program, only 10 percent of these individuals had adequate diets, as measured by the basic four food groups. After EFNEP participation, 30 percent had adequate diets. The most substantial improvements were in consumption of fruits and vegetables, and milk.

Primarily funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, EFNEP is administered in this state by the University of California Cooperative Extension. The program is in operation in 17 counties.

**Jesse Collins, coordinator for the Encanto community garden in San Diego, shows program assistant Nita Steele beans, tomatoes, and pickles from the garden.**



One teaching tool has been a food guide emphasizing four basic food groups: milk, meat, fruits and vegetables, and breads and cereals. Also stressed are those nutrients that are often lacking in diets of the target group—calcium, vitamin A, vitamin C, and iron.

The success of EFNEP has been measured in part with an evaluation procedure incorporating the four basic food groups. One such procedure is a series of “24-hour food recalls,” in which the participant lists all foods eaten in the last 24 hours.

The first in the series is taken as a base line, upon enrollment. Then an EFNEP program assistant develops an educational program and a plan of action tailored to the needs and interests of the individual homemaker. The program assistant goes through a series of lessons—generally one to two hours each—mainly in the homemaker’s kitchen, supplemented with actual food demonstrations. Additional 24-hour food recalls are taken at six-month intervals. This was originally done for a period of three years, but now it is done only until the homemaker is about to be “graduated,” or for about one year.

In California about 120,000 food recalls have been completed. They are done only with the homemaker in each household; diets of other family members

are assumed to be comparable. The number of homemakers who consume at least one serving from each of the four food groups is documented, and also those who consume the recommended number of servings from each of the four groups.

Observations over a seven-year period show that homemakers make their smallest change in the consumption of foods from the meat group. This is because 75 percent of the newly enrolled homemakers are already consuming the recommended two servings daily of foods from this group before teaching starts. The third recall shows that the percentage of homemakers consuming the recommended level of foods from the meat

group increases to 85 percent after a year in the program.

The greatest improvement is in fruit and vegetable consumption. Over a seven-year period, about 24 percent of newly enrolled homemakers have reported consuming the recommended four servings of foods from the fruit and vegetable group. After a year in the program, about 50 percent are consuming the recommended daily amounts from this food group.

Good improvement is also seen in the consumption of foods from the milk group. About 40 percent of newly enrolled homemakers consume the recommended two servings of these foods daily. At the end of the teaching period, the



Sonoma County staff assistant Maria Reyes demonstrates zucchini preparation. Cooking demonstrations stressing nutrition information are an integral part of the EFNEP program.

percentage has increased to well over 60 percent.

About the same improvement is seen with the consumption of foods in the breads and cereals group, but more newly enrolled homemakers are already consuming the recommended four servings a day before teaching starts (about 45 percent). By the end of the teaching period, this figure goes up to 65 percent.

There is continuing evidence from limited research and from the logs of home visits conducted by EFNEP program assistants that even better changes are taking place in the food habits of the children in the families.

One of the best features of the program has been the recruitment, hiring, and training of members of the communities targeted for the program. These program assistants are the key to helping families improve their well-being through food and nutrition training. The program assistants have been enthusiastic learners and have improved their own dietary habits and shopping patterns.

The first and most important step in the program is to recruit program assistants who have the greatest probability of success. A significant number are bilingual. Among the over 100,000 families EFNEP has helped in California, about 50 percent have Spanish surnames, 25 percent are Black, 20 percent are non-Spanish-speaking Caucasians, and 5 percent includes American Indians, Asians, and others. Although non-Spanish-speaking Caucasians comprise two-thirds of the identified poor in California, these families do not seem to congregate in poverty neighborhoods, and they have been harder to reach than other ethnic groups, particularly because they do not choose to enroll in proportion to their estimated need.

The program assistants are recruited to reflect the neighborhoods in which they are assigned and are intensively trained for at least a month. On-the-job training continues throughout their employment.

About one out of every two homemakers approached by the program assistants enrolls in the program. Enrollment means enumerating the number and ages of those in the family and providing other demographic data. This enables the program assistant to personalize the food and nutrition information for each family according to size, income level, other available resources, and educational background.

One challenge facing the program

assistants is helping homemakers overcome habits that involve poor food choices. The poor must spend a greater percentage of their income for food, and mistakes in food choices are more detrimental than when more money is available for food purchases. The average percentage of disposable income spent for food in the United States is about 16 percent, but most California EFNEP families average around 33 percent, and some spend as high as half of their meager income for food.

Other subjects closely related to nutrition and included in the program are:

- Financial management, including the essential components of budgeting

and planning for adequate diets.

- Meal planning and food selection, buying, and preparation.

- Use and care of kitchen and other equipment necessary for food preparation, storage, or utilization.

- Health and sanitation practices, including food safety.

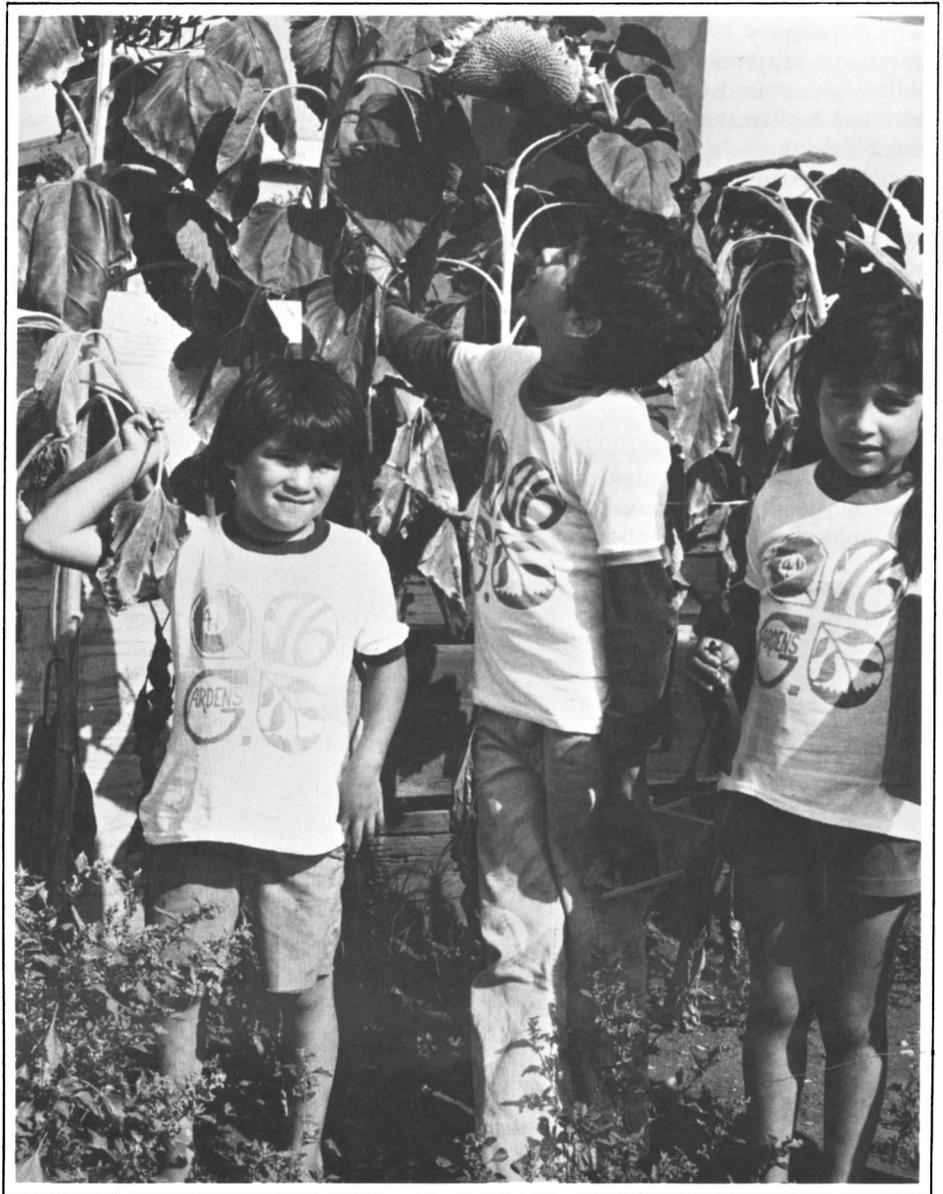
- Personal development through improved diets, including weight reduction and weight control.

- Interpersonal and family relationships as they affect diets and nutrition.

- Gardening and food production.

- Food preservation.

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**Sunflower plants are a "fringe benefit" bordering the Logan Street community garden in San Diego. Youngsters from the six families involved in this EFNEP-related project proudly wear their 4-H "camisetas."**