

Gardening Influences Tots' Views on Veggies

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By Alison McCook

PHILADELPHIA (Reuters Health) - Let preschoolers get their hands dirty in a garden, and you might see a shift in their attitudes toward vegetables, new study findings suggest. Researchers at Texas A&M University in College Station discovered that when 4- and 5-year-olds spent around 30 minutes per week planting and tending to a garden, they became less likely to refuse vegetables when offered them.

The children also increased their preference for green beans over other vegetables after spending 8 weeks in a garden that included green beans. Young children often think that food comes from a grocery store, study author Sandra G. Lorenz told Reuters Health. Letting them work in a garden and watch edible things grow allows them to "make a connection to their food source," Lorenz said, perhaps rendering it more appealing.

Beyond seeing where vegetables come from, working in a garden lets kids become attached to the foods, the researcher added, which may render the vegetables they grew themselves even more appealing than those they buy. "The hope is then that they would be more likely to consume food they grew," Lorenz noted.

Lorenz and her colleagues presented their findings here on Monday at the 85th Annual Meeting of the American Dietetic Association. The ADA is a professional organization representing the nation's licensed nutritionists and dietitians. During the study, the researchers brought 22 children, age 4 and 5 years, to gardening plots for 30 minutes per week for 8 weeks. The children planted green beans, bell peppers, radishes and cherry tomatoes. After planting the vegetables, the children watered the gardens each week, weeded the land and got involved in composting.

In an interview with Reuters Health, Lorenz said that she was surprised to find that most children said they liked the taste of vegetables they were fed even before gardening began. The children tasted the four types they later planted plus two others that were not included in the gardens. However, the researcher noted that after spending 8 weeks gardening, the children became less likely to refuse the four types of vegetables they had grown, and also ranked green beans higher in order of preference than they had at the beginning of the study.

Bringing young children to gardens may be an easy way to get them to like vegetables, and they may also become more willing to try unfamiliar types, Lorenz noted. Involving parents in the process--perhaps by starting a garden at home--may help kids like vegetables even more, she suggested. Furthermore, the gardens used in the current study were quite small, she said, so even schools in an urban environment can use the activity to foster their young students' appreciation for vegetables.

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