

Introduction to the NurtureShock Blog



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By Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman



At Nutrition Network. *Photo: Rich Pedroncelli/AP*

Welcome to the NurtureShock blog. Let's start with a cautionary tale.

Christina Korten, an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles Unified School District--the second largest school district in the nation--was getting more and more worried about her students' health. The kids' obesity was an increasingly visible problem. However, with all of the focus on testing requirements and graduation eligibility, the schools never addressed nutrition in their curricula. Korten thought that if teachers could come up with a creative enough nutrition education program, kids would improve their eating habits and increase their physical activity.

She enlisted the help of a team of other teachers and researchers from UCLA to develop such a program, now called Nutrition Network. Rather than overwhelming teachers with another requirement, Korten's inspiration was to develop a sort of menu-style approach to the program, allowing teachers to creatively adapt it to their classroom. With a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture, by 2000, Nutrition Network was up and running - the laudable goal being to get kids to eat more fruit and vegetables, and spend at least an hour a day in some form of physical activity. Within four years, over 300,000 students were receiving some form of the curricula, at over 325 schools.

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In 2005, LA Unified asked UCLA to formally evaluate the program's effectiveness. The researchers conducted a study of nearly a thousand representative third, fourth, and fifth graders. About a quarter of those students were not in the Nutrition Network; they served as a control group. For the kids who were in the program, they received an average of 44.5 hours of nutrition instruction over the year. Some kids received as much as 60 hours of instruction - condensed into full-days, that would be equivalent to roughly two full weeks of class-time. Some of the schools opened up fruit-and-

vegetable bars in their cafeterias; others invited an organization called Harvest-of-the-Month to provide seasonal tastings of regionally-grown pears, sweet potatoes, peaches and corn, right in the classroom.

At the end of the school year, the UCLA researchers returned to survey the kids once again.

Compared to the control group, the kids in the Nutrition Network didn't eat any more fruits or vegetables, at school or home. Both groups ate about one piece of fruit a day, and slightly less than one serving of vegetables. The scholars had wondered if the cost of fresh produce might be the obstacle to eating more, but less than one percent of students said their parents couldn't afford fresh goods. Instead, the number one reason kids didn't fulfill their daily requirement was that they simply wanted something else to eat.

If anything, the program had backfired. After a year, fewer kids said that they liked vegetables than before the program began.

The decreases weren't huge, but the kids missed as much as two full weeks of other academics for a program that resulted in no appreciable positive behavioral change.

So what did Los Angeles Unified do? They decided that the program needed to be expanded. It now reaches some 380,000 students. By the time someone comes up with a really good nutrition program, LA Unified will probably have too much time, money and infrastructure invested in the Nutrition Network to even consider another option.

This is perfect example of how ideas take on incredible momentum merely on the goodness of their intentions. If Los Angeles Unified or the USDA had done any polling *before* allocating their grants, they would have discovered that kids didn't need to be taught that fruit tastes good. *97% already liked fruit.*

Nor did they need to be taught that vegetables are healthy. *97% already knew that too.*

It's for the kids. Has there ever been a more unassailable, saintly, honorable motivation? It's the trump card, in the deck of life-purposes.

But caring doesn't necessarily lead to good ideas. In fact, there's a risk of caring about kids so much that we lose our bearings and assume that all ideas driven by good intentions are automatically good ideas. So many well-intentioned people are doing so many things for the good of children, or in the name of children, that it's created a halo effect, blinding us from being sharp-minded as to what actually works.

All of which is to say, if you enjoy watching bad ideas get their comeuppance, the field of child development is a gold mine.

The purpose of this new blog, *NurtureShock*, is to pluck out genuinely good ideas from the vast ocean of the well-intended.

Some ground rules:

1. ***Science trumps anecdote.*** People's individual experience may not be the same as what the science says is the norm. The two are not mutually exclusive.
2. ***No coddling.*** Some of what you read might be upsetting, but we're not going to soften the science to avoid upsetting people.
3. ***No tips.*** Really interesting ideas get gutted when they're reduced to simple parenting tips. Instead, we'll try to translate the science so its applicability is apparent.
4. ***Buy our book.*** Many of the arguments made here will build on ideas begun in the book's chapters.
5. ***Nonparents are welcome.*** Nor do you have to be a caregiver to care. We want nonparents in this discussion too.
6. ***We take requests.*** If there's something in the news, or on your mind, that you want help deciphering, let us know.