

School Children as 'Messengers' for Improving Vitamin A Knowledge and Practices in Urban Slums.

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Research Article

Abstract: Background: Vitamin A deficiency (VAD) is still a significant public health problem in India among children. Deliberate and sustained nutrition education has been recognized as a potent tool for prevention and control of VAD. Children being future parents need to be aware of good nutrition and therefore it is important to provide nutrition education to them. **Objective:** To educate school children to initiate change in knowledge and practices with a specific focus on vitamin A deficiency. **Materials and Methods:** The study was carried out in selected slums in Mumbai, Western India. 50 school going children and their mothers were selected for the study. Questionnaire, individual interviews and focus group discussions were employed to collect data from both the groups at the baseline. Participatory learning techniques and group dynamics approach were used during education the sessions. **Results:** The knowledge scores of the children showed a significant change ($P<0.001$) after the intervention. There was significant increase in weekly frequency of consumption of YOVs ($P<0.5$). The mothers were aware of vitamin A foods (87.5%) and its deficiency (68.8%) after the intervention. **Conclusion:** Children can be used as messengers for spreading nutritional messages and promoting vitamin A foods. Involvement of mothers in nutrition education has compounding effect.

Keywords: Nutrition education: Vit A deficiency.

Introduction:

Vitamin A deficiency (VAD) is still a significant public health problem in India among children. Deliberate and sustained nutrition education has been recognized as a potent tool for prevention and control of VAD all over the world. Nutrition education of school children has the potential to positively impact the nutritional and health behavior.

Healthy eating habits acquired in school age will remain with them for a long time. Children being future parents need to be aware of good nutrition and therefore it is important to provide nutrition education to them. As members of the communities, children can spread health messages to younger children, peers, families and communities. They can act as messengers for nutrition education to the mothers to influence knowledge, attitudes and practices about various nutrients including vitamin A¹. Nutrition education of

school children and their parents have indicated that it is a powerful means of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, practices and nutritional profiles of families and communities in the long run².

The present study aimed at educating school children to initiate change in knowledge and practices with a specific focus on vitamin A deficiency.

Subjects and Methods:

The study was carried out in selected slums in Mumbai, Western India. 50 school going children and their mothers were selected for the study. An assessment of the knowledge, attitudes and household practices with regard to nutrition, with specific focus on vitamin A rich foods was carried out. Questionnaire, individual interviews and focus group discussions were employed to collect data from both the groups at the baseline.

Innovative communication methods and materials such as stories, role-plays, games, charts, flannel graphs etc. were developed based on the perceived needs of the target group. Participatory learning techniques and group dynamics approach were used during education the sessions. The intervention for children comprised of one session per week for the period of three months while 8 sessions were organized for their mothers. Games and other activities were also organized for children as part of the intervention.

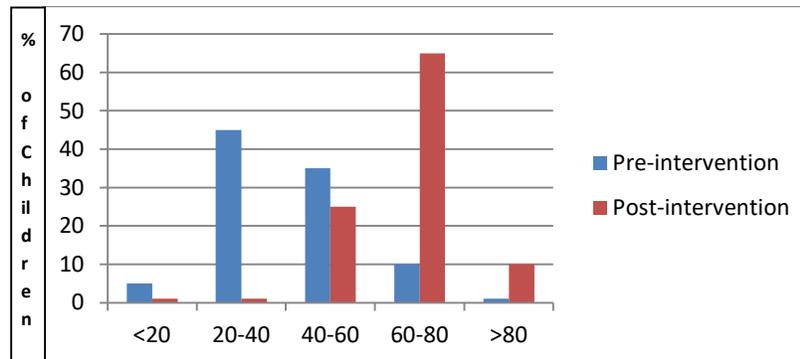
After the intervention, assessment of the knowledge, attitudes and household practices of school children and their mothers was repeated using the questionnaire, individual interviews.

Results and Discussion:

The results indicated that nutrition education promoted knowledge and positive food practices among the children and their mothers. The knowledge scores of the children showed a significant change ($P<0.001$) after the intervention. The mean score for knowledge

increased from 19.4 to 31.5, out of maximum possible score for knowledge was noted as a result of the

intervention where majority of children scored 60-80%. (Figure1).



Frequency of % Score

Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Percent Score

Majority of the children (76%) disliked yellow-orange vegetables and fruits (YOVs) such as pumpkin, papaya while a fair proportion (38%) did not like green leafy vegetables (GLVs), prior to the intervention. The reasons being dislike for taste, not brought at home, etc. However, after intervention a reduction in proportion of children who disliked these foods was noted. This could be attributed to nutrition education of children and especially mothers who motivated (70%) their children and tried to prepared these foods in more acceptable way (73%). There was significant increase in weekly frequency of consumption of YOVS ($P<0.5$) while no significant change was noted consumption of DGLVs. On becoming aware of good nutrition, children learnt wise food selection and spend their pocket money in buying more nutritious snacks.

It was observed that majority of the mothers were aware of vitamin A foods (87.5%) and its deficiency (68.8%) after the intervention. Knowledge about variety of DGLV and YOVS preparations also found to be increased. Several beliefs and practices were noted prior to intervention which attributed the non/low consumption of vitamin A foods. However, after the intervention reduction in proportion of mothers who avoided or not purchased provitamin A foods was noted.

Conclusion:

Nutrition education was effective in bringing about a desirable change in Knowledge and practices of children and their mothers. Children can be used as messengers for spreading nutritional messages and promoting vitamin A foods. At the same time it is

important to involve mothers in nutrition education for a compounding effect. These school children will now be participating in nutrition education activities along with the existing health staff in spreading nutritional messages in the community.

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