

# NEW Soul for Families: Lessons Learned from Implementing a Plant-based Nutrition Program in the Community

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Childhood obesity is linked to a higher risk of other chronic diseases. Cultural preferences for soul food dishes may contribute to obesity in African American children and families.

**Objective:** To discuss lessons learned from the development and implementation of NEW Soul for Families, a plant-based nutrition program for African American children.

**Methods:** A partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs, EdVenture Children’s Museum, and the Food Academy was formed. Children (n=15) participated in the program across two cohorts. Each cohort lasted three weeks with three classes per week. Parents of enrolled children were invited to attend one class per week. Children learned nutrition topics and engaged in hands-on cooking.

**Lessons Learned:** Community partners shared power to successfully implement the program; surveying parents increased their attendance from the first cohort to the second cohort; children rated the program positively.

**Conclusions:** NEW Soul for Families was well received by community partners and participants. More studies are needed to determine effectiveness.

## **KEYWORDS**

African American, Healthy Eating, Obesity, Health promotion, Dissemination, Children

## Introduction

Obesity disproportionately affects African Americans living in the United States<sup>1</sup> and is associated with higher risks of cardiovascular disease,<sup>2</sup> diabetes,<sup>3</sup> and cancer.<sup>4</sup> In South Carolina, 41.7% of African American adults<sup>5</sup> and 20.9% of African American children aged 10 to 17 years old have obesity.<sup>6</sup> Poor diet quality is a major risk factor for increased obesity rates in adults and children.<sup>7</sup> Among African Americans, cultural preferences for soul food dishes that have less nutrient density,<sup>8</sup> convenience meals, or lack of time spent cooking can contribute to unhealthy nutrition. Common food preparation practices among African Americans can create a barrier to adapting a healthier diet.<sup>9</sup> In addition, convenience meals often yield larger portion sizes and have increased levels of fat, sodium, and sugar.<sup>10</sup>

The Nutritious Eating with Soul (NEW Soul) Study was developed at the [Blinded for Review] in 2018 to teach and examine the impact of a culturally tailored plant-based soul food diet on cardiovascular disease risk factors for African American adults.<sup>11</sup> The primary trial was tested in a university-based teaching kitchen and featured cooking demonstrations by soul food chefs in the community.<sup>12</sup> Recent successful efforts have focused on disseminating and implementing the program in the community through partnerships with local restaurants.<sup>13</sup>

As another opportunity for dissemination, because the primary NEW Soul study worked with only adults, a child and family-focused program of NEW Soul was warranted. Given effectiveness of the NEW Soul program in achieving weight loss,<sup>13</sup> expanding the NEW Soul program's reach to children and families may help to decrease childhood obesity rates in South Carolina.<sup>14</sup> Many children consume low levels of fruits and vegetables and high levels of sugars and solid fats, contributing to poor diet quality.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the focus of the NEW Soul for Families program is to help children incorporate more whole plant foods into their diet. Teaching

African Americans healthy habits at a younger age may also encourage behaviors to continue into adulthood, helping to curb high rates of obesity and associated comorbidities.

The NEW Soul for Families program reaches African American children and their families in a three-week nutrition program consisting of nine classes. See Figure 1. The program was designed and adapted using materials and recipes from the main NEW Soul study.<sup>11</sup> The content covered in the NEW Soul for Families program consisted of simplified versions of the main NEW Soul Study. Since NEW Soul for Families is a shorter program, the content from the the main study covering breakfast, lunch, and dinner was used. Time allotted to teach nutrition content was shortened from the adult program with an added focus on activities and application. Age-appropriate activities included a fill-in sheet from the USDA's MyPlate<sup>16</sup>, reviewing a nutrition label, and hands-on cooking time. Additional attention in the child-focused curriculum prioritized the selection of child-friendly recipes (e.g., pancakes, smoothies, pizza) from the main NEW Soul study. Therefore, the primary purposes of this paper are to discuss the formation of the community partnership to develop and implement the NEW Soul for Families program and lessons learned. The secondary purpose of the study is to report attendance and child evaluations of the overall program.



Figure 1. The NEW Soul for Families program flyer.

## Methods

### *Identifying Community Partners*

The NEW Soul for Families program had partnerships with three local organizations: (1) Boys & Girls Clubs of the Midlands (referred to as “Boys & Girls Clubs” hereafter), (2) EdVenture Children’s Museum (referred to as “EdVenture” hereafter), and (3) the Food Academy. Initially, EdVenture was the sole community partner for the study, located in the downtown area with easy access from major thoroughfares in the city. This partnership began in 2018 when the NEW Soul team was invited to a meeting hosted by EdVenture to learn about efforts in the community surrounding nutrition and health. Following this meeting, the NEW Soul study team partnered with an African American chef who worked at EdVenture and oversaw nutrition programs delivered in the teaching kitchen at EdVenture. Because NEW Soul

was focused on adults and EdVenture's primary population consists of children and families, the NEW Soul team continued meeting with EdVenture to discuss the possibility of offering a child-based nutrition program as the adult program neared completion. EdVenture's central location in the city, existing nutrition programming for children, and having the desired facilities (i.e. teaching kitchen space) to allow for hands-on learning and cooking were important for the study team to consider for the NEW Soul for Families partnership.

In February 2021, the NEW Soul team submitted an internal grant at their institution with a letter of support from EdVenture administration to partner with the study. Upon receipt of the funding and approval from the university's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study, the NEW Soul team met with EdVenture staff. EdVenture staff determined that another community partner would be vital for the program's success, the Boys & Girls Clubs. EdVenture and the Boys & Girls Clubs also had existing partnerships offering programs for children in the community. Therefore, EdVenture facilitated the addition of the Boys & Girls Clubs to the NEW Soul partnership.

In November 2021, the NEW Soul team established the third and final partner for the NEW Soul for Families program, the Food Academy. The Food Academy is a local hospitality company owned by two individuals in the community known for providing nutrition services such as catering, meal preparation, and cooking classes. Chefs at the Food Academy had also previously worked with the NEW Soul team and had experience in nutrition education for children. In this multi-partnership approach, the roles for each community partner were openly discussed in a meeting organized by the academic partner. Roles were delineated as: EdVenture would host the program in their teaching kitchen facility and provide equipment for the nutrition classes; the Boys & Girls Clubs would help facilitate the identification and recruitment of

eligible participants; the Food Academy would oversee the teaching of the classes and interacting with the children and parents. Once all partners had identified and agreed upon their roles and resources they could offer the program in a collaborative discussion, the academic partner requested that all partners proceed in their assigned roles. All partners agreed that continued conversations and meetings would take place to ensure sharing of responsibilities and that each partner would continue to contribute to successfully implement the program. All community partners and study staff met weekly to discuss progress, findings, and research implications throughout the program. These discussions contributed to the development of the present manuscript.

### *Program Design*

The NEW Soul for Families program was piloted across two cohorts, each lasting three weeks. Cohort 1 occurred in February 2022 and Cohort 2 occurred in March 2022. Classes were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of each week in the afternoon (i.e., 9 total classes in the program) and were scheduled to last one hour. Due to transportation logistics, the community partnership team determined that classes on Mondays and Wednesdays would take place at the Boys & Girls Clubs. Then, on Fridays, the Boys & Girls clubs transported children to EdVenture to have class in the teaching kitchen. This set-up allowed for a natural invitation for parents to attend and sit with their child during the three Friday classes at EdVenture.

As stated, classes were led by nutrition chef educators from the Food Academy. Table 1 provides the outline of each class in the program. Each class consisted of a plant-based nutrition lesson and hands-on cooking, where the children learned to prepare a healthy food item and substitute plant-based ingredients in place of common animal products. All classes contained a demonstration for learning how to read nutrition labels related to the content covered during that

class (e.g., identifying fiber content in a food item). Children packaged leftovers from each class to take home and were encouraged to share with their parents.

In week one, the focus was on whole grains and breakfast recipes. In week two, the focus was on fruits and vegetables and recipes centered around lunch items. In week three, children learned about protein and fats and cooked recipes centered around dinner dishes. Children also received their own NEW Soul for Families notebook that included printouts of the nutrition lesson slides, additional nutrition handouts, and recipes for each of the items prepared in class.

### *Recruitment*

In virtual weekly meetings with all community partners and study staff, administration at the Boys & Girls Clubs selected one after-school location in the area close to EdVenture. A list of eligible children enrolled in the after-school program at the Boys & Girls Clubs was provided to NEW Soul research staff for enrollment purposes. Eligibility criteria consisted of being 9 to 12 years old and identifying as African American.

Parents of eligible children were first sent an email explaining the program with a link to an online interest form. Due to low response via email, research staff visited the Boys & Girls Clubs location on two evenings to speak to parents of eligible children and provide them with a QR code to begin enrolling their child in the program. Lastly, research staff made phone calls and sent text messages to parents to discuss enrolling their child in the program. Parents were sent an electronic informed consent form to sign and officially enroll their child in the program.

The study recruitment goal was twenty children, ten per cohort. This number was selected due to available study funding and logistics for the nutrition chef educators to supervise a suitable number of children during cooking portions of class. Twenty-three parents were contacted; one parent declined participation, two children declined participation, two parents



were reached by phone, but did not sign the e-consent form, and three parents were unable to be reached during in-person visits at the Boys & Girls Clubs and multiple phone call and text message attempts.

Parents reported child demographics when completing the initial online interest form. In total, fifteen children enrolled, ten in the first cohort and five in the second cohort. Eleven boys and four girls participated, and the mean age was  $9.5\pm 0.8$  years old.

Prior to attending the first class, children provided verbal assent to research staff and received a binder to keep after the study containing the nutrition handouts and recipes covered in the classes. Participants also took home leftovers from each cooking demonstration. In addition, all families could receive a \$20 amazon gift card for participating in the program. This incentive was part of the study protocol as discussed by community partners and approved by the Institutional Review Board to compensate for time participating in the study.

At the conclusion of each class, children completed brief, anonymous surveys. The survey asked: (1) how much children enjoyed the class, (2) how helpful the nutrition lesson was, (3) how much children liked the nutrition lesson, and (4) how much children could apply the lesson to their daily life. All question responses were rated on a Likert scale. Questions 1 and 3 were on a scale of 1 to 3 where 1 means “Not at all”, 2 means “A little bit”, and 3 means “A lot”. Question 2 was answered on a scale of 1 to 2 where 1 means “Not helpful at all” and 2 means “Helpful”. Question 4 was answered on a scale of 1 to 2 where 1 means “Disagree” and 2 means “Agree”. The survey also contained two open-ended questions allowing children to write what was enjoyed most and least about the class that day. Survey data were compiled and summarized after each class. Weekly summaries were provided to the research team and community partners to discuss any changes to implement in upcoming classes.

## Results

Two cohorts of the program were successfully implemented. Across the two cohorts, 106 anonymous surveys were completed after classes attended by children in the program. Table 2 displays the average results of the anonymous satisfaction surveys completed at the end of each class. Class satisfaction was rated highly across both cohorts for all four questions in the survey. The final two questions asked what participants' favorite and least favorite part of class were. Overall, participants' favorite parts of class were the hands-on cooking or trying new ingredients (n=79 of 106 anonymous surveys collected, representing 15 possible unique perspectives across the program). Regarding what participants liked least, the most common answer was "Nothing/I don't know" or left blank (n=54 of 106 anonymous surveys). Participants also shared a dislike of the taste some of the ingredients used in the cooking demonstration (n=24 of 106 anonymous surveys). Class attendance of children was high in both cohorts. Children attended an average of 84.4% of classes. Parents were invited to attend 3 classes per cohort at EdVenture. During both cohorts, an average of less than 2 parents attended Friday classes.

## Lessons Learned

Programs such as NEW Soul for Families may be valuable community-based resources in preventing high rates of childhood obesity. The NEW Soul for Families program established a successful partnership in the community to deliver two cohorts of the program for African American children and their families. Program retention and attendance were high. Interest remains from all community partners to apply for funding opportunities to deliver the program to more African American children and families.

The first lesson learned from this program is the successful power sharing between all community partners involved, EdVenture, the Boys & Girls Clubs, and the Food Academy. In

regular meetings, each community partner discussed what they could provide and made it clear what they needed to make the program successful. For example, EdVenture staff noted having the teaching kitchen facilities available, but shared limitations to helping recruit and transport the desired study population. Staff from the Boys & Girls Clubs volunteered their ability to provide recruitment assistance and transportation from the Boys & Girls Clubs to EdVenture. Staff from the Food Academy had child-friendly cooking supplies available as well as experience working with and teaching the desired study population.

Decision-making power for this program was also shared between community partners. For example, the program was originally designed and presented to all community partners to have every class take place at EdVenture. Upon hearing this proposal, a representative from the Boys & Girls Clubs suggested having classes on site at the Boys & Girls Clubs location on Mondays and Wednesday and traveling to EdVenture on Fridays for class, citing transportation costs and logistics for parents picking up their children. As a compromise, the Boys & Girls Clubs offered a separate room and kitchen to host classes at the Boys & Girls Clubs location. Thus, the revised schedule of classes changed from classes three times a week at EdVenture to classes two times a week at the Boys & Girls Clubs and once a week at EdVenture. Another example of decision-making power being shared is that chef instructors from the Food Academy were encouraged and given permission to review and modify any of the planned recipes throughout the program based on suggestions from participants (i.e. pizza).

One of the primary difficulties arose when a representative from one of the respective community partners could not attend the weekly meeting. This difficulty was overcome by sometimes having an alternative staff member from the organization attend to report back as well as scheduling a brief follow-up meeting or phone call to make sure all community partners

understood their roles and responsibilities for the upcoming week. Overall, open communication throughout the weeks leading up to, during, and after the program between all community partners allowed for successful power sharing. While funding for this initial study no longer remains, the study team has remained in contact with the partners about other opportunities to work together and fund future cohorts. In addition, another community location (i.e., a public library) with a teaching kitchen classroom has been identified as a potential host site. In conversations with this new location, success stories of the initial multi-site partnerships have proved beneficial in promoting the program.

The second lesson learned from program implementation is that while child attendance was high, parent attendance and engagement were low. In efforts to increase parent attendance, the research team surveyed parents enrolled in the second cohort to inquire about a different time and day of the week to increase their attendance in the classes at EdVenture. After surveying parents, the classes at EdVenture were moved from Friday afternoons in the first cohort to Thursday evenings in the second cohort, which helped slightly increase parent attendance. On average, less than 1 parent attended each Friday class in the first cohort and an average of 3 parents attended each Thursday class in the second cohort. In addition to scheduling conflicts, parents may not have attended classes for lack of interest in cooking or perception about the importance of nutrition.

Parent engagement to complete surveys was extremely low (n=2 completed baseline and follow up survey pairs of 15 enrolled children). Future studies should increase communication with parents about study importance, their completion of surveys, and intent to attend one class per week with their child from the start of the program. In addition, due to time limitations, no orientation or interest sessions were held. It is possible that hosting an orientation session to

interact with parents may have helped educate parents about the program and gain a greater understanding of their availability for participation in classes at EdVenture. Having a trusted figure lead the orientation session and send communications to parents throughout the program may be beneficial in parent retention.

The final lesson learned is that a child-based nutrition program can be adapted from a curriculum originally created for adults.<sup>11</sup> The NEW Soul for Families program was adapted from the NEW Soul study, an evidence-based program for adults.<sup>12</sup> Recipes, activities, and program materials were tailored to create a satisfactory program for child participants. Future iterations of the NEW Soul for Families program can incorporate these lessons learned for future cohorts to strengthen study finding, application, and generalizability.

The NEW Soul for Families program is a positive and memorable experience for children as they rated classes with high satisfaction and had high attendance. Children looked forward to each class and the new dishes they would learn to cook. One anonymous survey had a note of “I love cooking with y’all.” The positive evaluations by children from this preliminary study may be appealing to future community partners wanting to offer the program and also help strengthen future funding proposals. Future researchers engaging in similar efforts should keep open communication with community partners and parents to ensure power sharing between community partners and engagement from parents.

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## Tables

**Table 1. New Soul for Families Curriculum.**

	<b>Location</b>	<b>Lesson Topic</b>	<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Recipe</b>	<b>Plant-based ingredient substitution (s)</b>
Week 1: Monday  Breakfast	[blinded for review]	Whole grains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe what a whole grain is</li> <li>• Name examples of whole grains</li> <li>• Identify why whole grains are important in the diet</li> <li>• Determine how many grams of whole grains to eat in a day</li> </ul>	Baked Cheese Grits	Cauliflower Queso
Week 1: Wednesday  Breakfast	[blinded for review]	Fiber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the purpose of fiber</li> <li>• Differentiate between soluble and insoluble fiber</li> <li>• Identify how many grams of sugar, fat, and fiber should be consumed per serving</li> </ul>	Cornbread	Applesauce in place of eggs Non-dairy milk
Week 1: Friday  Breakfast	[blinded for review]	Fiber and glucose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the purpose of glucose in the body</li> <li>• Understand how fiber and glucose work together to keep the body healthy</li> <li>• Recognize how much fiber should be consumed each day</li> </ul>	Pancakes	Applesauce in place of eggs Non-dairy milk

Week 2: Monday  Lunch	[blinded for review]	Fruits and vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discriminate between a fruit and a vegetable</li> <li>• Identify the benefits of fruits and vegetables</li> <li>• Explain the healthy serving size of fruits and vegetables to eat each meal</li> </ul>	Peach Cobbler Smoothies	Non-dairy milk
Week 2: Wednesday  Lunch	[blinded for review]	Calcium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify sources of calcium</li> <li>• Describe the importance of physical activity in bone health</li> <li>• Understand how much calcium is needed each day</li> </ul>	Collard Greens	No inclusion of animal products
Week 2: Friday  Lunch	[blinded for review]	Glucose in fruits and vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand how plants vs. animals store extra energy</li> <li>• Explain why glucose is released slowly in fruits and vegetables</li> <li>• Describe how starch is converted to glucose</li> </ul>	Banana “Nice” Cream	Frozen bananas  Non-dairy milk
Week 3: Monday  Dinner	[blinded for review]	Protein	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define a protein</li> <li>• Describe how much protein is needed each day</li> <li>• List foods with protein in them</li> </ul>	Tacos	Plant-based meatless crumbles
Week 3: Wednesday  Dinner	[blinded for review]	Getting fats from nuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe why nuts are important</li> <li>• Learn the history of nuts</li> <li>• Identify the health benefits of different nuts</li> <li>• Recognize how many grams of fat are needed each day and where to get them</li> <li>• Define arginine</li> </ul>	Peanut butter	N/A



Week 3: Friday Dinner	[blinded for review]	Fats and protein work together in cholesterol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Define cholesterol</li><li>• Identify how much cholesterol is a healthy amount</li><li>• List the names of good cholesterol and bad cholesterol</li><li>• Describe what happens if you have too much cholesterol</li></ul>	Pizza	Plant-based cheese
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**Table 2. Class Satisfaction Survey Results.**

<b>Question</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Average Rating</b>
How much did you enjoy today's class?	108	1-3	2.9±0.3
How helpful was the nutrition lesson?	105	1-2	2.0±0.1
I liked the cooking demonstration:	106	1-3	2.9±0.4
I can apply what I learned in today's class to my life.	104	1-2	2.0±0.1