Afterschool Spotlight

Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area

SUPPORTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTHY EATING



Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area Garden Program

Bemidji, Minnesota

120 Average number of students served

85% Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- Minnesota Department of Education
- Individual donors
- Fundraising events

Cultivating healthy habits

From a healthier weight and improved physical fitness to better academic performance and a lower risk of depression, healthy eating and physical activity promote a range of positive outcomes for young people. However, most children and adolescents do not meet the recommended dietary and physical activity guidelines, putting them at an elevated risk for several immediate and long-term health conditions, including obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Poor nutrition and physical inactivity also have broad societal consequences. From a national security perspective, only 2 in 5 youth aged 17-24 are "weight-eligible and physically prepared" for basic military training. And the economic costs are steep: In 2019 alone, childhood obesity was linked to an estimated $1.3 billion in medical expenses.

Afterschool and summer programs are key partners in efforts to keep young people healthy, active, and engaged. They help young people build lifelong healthy habits by providing daily meals and regular opportunities for physical activity; offering engaging experiences like gardening, cooking healthful foods, or trying out new sports; and fostering supportive relationships between students and staff that encourage nutritious eating and excitement about physical activity.

Overview

The **Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area** offers a year-round garden program for Club members in 1st through 12th grade. Youth gain hands-on indoor and outdoor gardening experience, as well as entrepreneurial and life skills from selling the season's produce to their local school district and restaurants. They also learn about nutrition by preparing healthy snacks and meals using produce from their garden. Through planting, watering, harvesting, and cooking, Club members involved in the garden program develop the knowledge and expertise needed to form and sustain healthy habits well into adulthood.

A typical day for students

As one of the Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area's many program offerings, daily programming in the garden is a highlight and is organized by grade range. Each hour offers hands-on instruction with more supervision for younger Club members in 1st through 3rd grades and more autonomy for older students.

Starting in March, youth prepare for the growing season by planting seeds in small containers under grow lights and tending to them with routine watering.

Club members also enjoy frequent snacks from the garden while monitoring its progress. Once sprouted, members transplant the seedlings into milk cartons for several additional weeks during which Club members handle extra watering and rotate fans to help strengthen the plants' stems. Then, youth roll up their sleeves to transplant the seedlings outside into the 20+ raised garden beds. During the all-day summer program that launches in June, Club members enjoy more time, more steps, and more sunshine and fresh air while tending to and learning about the different varieties of fruits and vegetables, taking a vested interest in each plant and bed.

This cycle continues throughout Minnesota's growing season, although participation peaks in the summer when the garden requires more attention during its high-yield season. Along with managing the summer harvest, members also receive daily instruction and fun projects from the highly experienced garden manager related to gardening, nutrition, environmental education, and science during the summer. Although, as a year-round program, gardening is not limited to peak growing and harvesting months. During the winter, students use the program's four indoor hydroponic systems to grow leafy greens, such as lettuce and basil.

Program characteristics

Through comprehensive nutrition education, outdoor experiences, and increased access to fruits, vegetables, and healthy meals, the garden program's primary goal is to sow the seeds of healthy lifestyle choices so that youth have the tools needed to lead healthy futures.

Making healthy eating fun, engaging, and hands-on is key to meeting that goal. Club youth are involved in every step of the gardening cycle, from planning and rotating the crops to harvesting the season's produce, creating a sense of investment in the garden and excitement for the produce as they watch the seedlings grow into everyday foods. The program also grows interesting and uncommon crops, like purple snap peas and orange cauliflower, to spark students' curiosity and willingness to try new things. Club youth who may be hesitant to try new vegetables and fruits are pleasantly surprised after tasting the creative ways they can prepare the produce, such as kale chips (seasoned kale leaves baked in the oven, a favorite among Club members and staff); homemade strawberry, plum, or ground cherry jam; and even beet chocolate cake. Many recipes are used during the program's annual October Harvest Celebration, where students help plan, prepare, and serve food directly from their garden to their peers, parents, and key supporters alongside a professional local chef, who also teaches them kitchen safety, food sanitation, and culinary skills.

Additionally, the garden's produce is used in several ways beyond the program to foster healthier eating habits for students' families and their broader communities. For instance, the program serves as a local farm and partners with the Bemidji School District, where their produce is used in school lunches. Additionally, the program offers excess produce to parents and guardians to take home for free. Often, students in the garden introduce their families to new foods

Challenges

For more than a decade, the overall physical activity grade for children and adolescents has been a D-. At the same time, young people are far exceeding their recommended intakes of sodium, saturated fats, and added sugars.

Healthy eating and physical activity decline as children enter adolescence. Data from the National Survey of Children's Health found that only 26% of children aged 6-11 engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day, and this decreases to 14% among 12-17-year-olds. Additionally, 14- to 18-year-olds have the lowest Healthy Eating Index score—a measure of diet quality—scoring just 51 out of 100.

Immediate and far-reaching consequences. Children who are inactive and have a poor diet are at risk of becoming overweight or obese, which in turn places them at risk for several health, mental health, and social issues, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and bullying. Long-term consequences of inactivity and unhealthy eating include obesity in adulthood and a number of health concerns, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart attack, and stroke.

Differences exist accessing healthy foods and physical activities. Due to structural and environmental barriers, youth of color and young people from low-income families are less likely to meet recommended healthy eating and physical activity guidelines. For example, children from low-income families, Black and Hispanic children, and children living in rural areas have a higher likelihood of living in a food-insecure household than children nationally. Additionally, girls and children with disabilities have far fewer opportunities for physical activity than boys and children without disabilities.

Read *Building Healthy Habits and Healthy Futures: How Afterschool Programs Are Supporting Physical Activity and Healthy Eating* to learn more.

and recipes with garden produce, enabling healthy eating to continue at home. And, through the garden program's on-site farmers markets, students exercise their food and culinary knowledge, as well as build their entrepreneurial and money management skills, by educating and selling low-cost produce to their families and community members.

Outcomes

The Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area's garden program has a positive impact on young people's healthy habit development and attitudes toward healthy eating. According to data collected by the National Youth Outcomes Initiative, an annual survey offered through the Boys & Girls Club of America, 87% of youth at the Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area reported consuming three or more fruits and vegetables a day, compared to youth in Minnesota (74%) and youth nationally (72%). Additionally, 46% of Club youth report 60 minutes of physical activity for six or more days, compared to youth at the state level (39%) and youth nationally (40%). The garden program is also creating excitement for healthier eating, with 90% of youth gardeners reporting having fun in the garden. As one youth gardener shares, "it's fun harvesting all the veggies in our garden! Now I like eating tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, strawberries, and even cucamelons!"

Program history

With years of experience in horticulture, nutrition education, and managing school gardens, Deb Dilley helped lead the establishment of the garden program in 2006 at the Boys & Girls Club of the Bemidji Area, hoping to provide an engaging opportunity for kids to eat healthier, while simultaneously addressing food insecurity in the county. Initially, the program started with only a handful of students and one raised garden bed, known as the "Pizza Garden," which grew pizza ingredients like tomatoes, peppers, basil, and onions. The Pizza Garden was so well received by members and families that every year thereafter, the program added a new bed to the garden, making space for a diverse range of fresh produce and allowing them to sell to the Bemidji School District and the local community. By 2021, the program had added a high tunnel, 15 more self-watering garden beds, an outdoor gardening education center, and indoor hydroponic growing systems for year-round gardening for its 120 youth gardeners.

Recommendations

For cultivating healthy habits:

- **Help supporters understand the bigger picture to encourage program growth and buy-in.** Youth gardens are fun and enriching, and they lay the foundation for healthy futures, but they also require an investment of time, money, and attention. As you're looking toward growing and sustaining your program, seek partnerships from those with a shared vision for your children's futures to encourage long-term investment.
- **Utilize your community.** If you are looking to start or enhance your own health or nutrition programming, most towns and counties have nutrition and health departments, cooperative extension programs offered by universities, fellow Boys & Girls Clubs that may have a gardening program, and Master Gardeners who can provide expert volunteer services for organizations. You don't need to be the expert or reinvent the wheel.

