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## **Teaching Children Lifelong Skills for Healthy Living**

The July/August issue of *Explore* featured Naturally Well, the children's culinary nutrition program of the Institute for Natural Medicine.

"[Kids in Crisis: The whole health learning solution](#)" depicts the profound physical and mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for children, families, educators, and healthcare professionals. As the article states, health experts are particularly concerned about dramatic changes in children's health over the past 3 years due to forced societal changes.

A recent study shows how [COVID19 confinements affected the health of children and teens](#) on all fronts, including eating habits. On the plus side, limited access to fast food decreased consumption. But children ate fewer fruits and vegetables and more snacks and sweets than before the pandemic, which has significant short- and long-term impacts on population health.

The authors call for reframing and a "significant re-alignment of assumptions and partnerships while embracing a broader view of what can be done immediately to strengthen children's mental health and well-being." They suggest expanding and integrating whole health lifestyle (WHL) community-based activities in schools, such as collective gardens and teaching kitchens, nature-based education, mindfulness practices and social skills development, and cognition-bolstering physical activities.

The [Naturally Well](#) program is designed to help address this concern with a STEAM-based enrichment curriculum that teaches children the value of healthy lifestyle choices and healthy eating. Naturally Well uses video and interactive cooking classes taught by a naturopathic doctor and program directors, games and activities, an animated character, and a smartphone app to reinforce learning. Classes integrate basic biology, math, and nutrition with discussions on healthy eating, exercise, stress management, and journaling.

As the authors describe, "WHL components reinforce two core pediatric integrative health principles in that they are preventive (focused on health promotion and creation, favoring proactive strategies versus reactive solutions) and participatory (creating health as a collaborative process)." When WHL learning activities are creative, hands-on, and collaborative, students recognize the value of healthy lifestyle choices and become empowered to take charge of their health.



As children mature, they begin making their own food choices at home, in school, with friends, and while eating out. These choices tend to persist through adulthood, whether healthy or harmful. With early and regular exposure to processed foods, there is greater risk for lifestyle-related health problems and chronic illnesses, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Data from Naturally Well's pilot program launch in southern Phoenix, Ariz., revealed the following:

- A 69% increase of children who comfortably differentiated between processed and whole foods.
- A 33% decrease of kids who ate/drank a sugary product daily.
- More than 50% said mindful breathing techniques learned in class helped with stress.
- Students reported feeling more confident about food portions and understanding healthy fats.
- 57% shared what they learned with their families.

With new insight into the well-being of youth comes an opportunity to shape social determinants of health. Giving children the tools they need to adopt a healthier lifestyle has a lifelong impact vital to the most vulnerable populations. By adopting enrichment and educational programs beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic, learning environments can help children develop a greater sense of purpose and meaning while nurturing their whole health.

INM is honored to be mentioned in *Explore* and grateful to authors Lawrence Rosen, Kate Tumelty Felice, and Taylor Walsh from the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine at Seton Hall University, New Jersey.

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### **About Naturally Well**

*Naturally Well is a division of the Institute for Natural Medicine's Food as Medicine program. We aim to give young people the tools they need to make informed choices for lifelong good health. We fulfill this mission by partnering with schools, after-school programs, community centers, recreation centers, churches, and homeschooling programs. The program's core goals center on education, awareness, and community support:*

1. Educate children about the basics of good health, nutrition, and preventive medicine.
2. Encourage diverse cultural groups to integrate their customs within healthy lifestyle choices for children and adults.
3. Create a health movement in the broader community, with youth at the lead.



4. Ease the planning and implementation burden for nonprofits, community centers, schools, homeschool classes, and other groups interested in children's health and wellness.

### **Media Contact**

#### **Institute for Natural Medicine**

Kimberly Lord Stewart  
Director, Naturally Well  
[kim@naturemed.org](mailto:kim@naturemed.org)