



GARDEN TO TABLE

It is widely acknowledged that not all children in New Zealand eat well. A disturbing number go to school each day without breakfast and yet a frightening percentage are overweight or obese. We know that poor food choices lead to poor health, and that the obesity/diabetes epidemic is the public health issue of our time.

Almost as confronting is the cultural deprivation that comes with the loss of familial food experiences. Without access to the shared table, children miss out on this crucial centre point for family life and an opportunity to share, interact and feel cared for.

The good news is that children are as responsive to positive food experiences as they are to negative ones, and that's where the Garden to Table programme comes in, providing limitless opportunities for positive experiences.

Currently running in nineteen schools around the country, it is designed to change the way children approach and think about food. It allows children to enthusiastically get their hands dirty and learn how to grow, harvest, prepare and share fresh, seasonal food.

The fundamental philosophy that underpins the Garden to Table programme, is that by setting good examples and engaging children's curiosity, as well as their energy and their taste buds, we can provide positive and memorable food experiences that will form the basis of positive lifelong eating habits.

By linking Garden to Table to the curriculum, the programme rapidly becomes embedded in the school and forms an important part of the children's learning. It also impacts on students' behaviour, attendance at school, self-confidence and self-esteem.

Where once parents would pass on the skills required to be able to feed oneself, be that growing or cooking food, there is a generation of parents who do not have this basic knowledge. This is not their fault but rather that of generations of processed food giants and their marketers telling people they don't have time to cook and that cooking is a chore rather than something that can bring joy into family life. Alongside this sits a disturbing disconnect from the land whereby children simply do not know that food, rather than coming from a supermarket, actually needs to be grown.

Children learn best through doing, through positive examples, through trial and error. We need to capture their interest, curiosity and energy as well as their appetites! As participants in Garden to Table, students discover the pleasures of hands-on food education, through regular classes in the vegetable garden and the kitchen classroom. Classes are facilitated by part-time garden and kitchen specialists in consultation with the teachers.



Students at East Tamaki School proudly showing the broccoli they have grown

Students learn to build and maintain a garden according to organic principles, and to grow and harvest a wide variety of vegetables, fruits and herbs. An abundant vegetable garden is created within the school grounds to provide edible, aromatic resources for the school kitchen. The creation and care of the garden teaches students about the natural world, its wonders and beauty and how to cultivate and care for it.

In the kitchen, students prepare a range of simple, delicious dishes from the seasonal produce they've grown. The finished meal is arranged with pride and care on tables set with flowers from the garden. The shared meal is a time for students, specialists, teachers and volunteers to enjoy the fruits of their labour, and each other's company and conversation.

It's not hard to see that Garden to Table, if available to all children aged seven to ten years, would impact greatly on future generations and their families across multiple aspects of their lives.

Garden to Table currently relies on grants funding, private donations, corporate partnerships and fundraising to fund the growth of the programme. At least seven new schools are scheduled to be enrolled in the programme during 2014.

For more information about Garden to Table contact Anne Barrowclough, Executive Officer at anne@gardentotable.org.nz

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