

Exploring the Experiences of Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) Who Educate Through Cooking and Food Preparation

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Background

Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) often provide guidance on healthy eating, but they do not universally teach hands-on cooking and food preparation. A healthier dietary pattern has been associated with cooking at home.^{1,2,3} However, evidence suggests lack of skills, knowledge and confidence impose barriers.^{1,4,5} RDNs have the potential to play a central role in teaching essential cooking skills and food-related knowledge.

Few studies have investigated the experiences of RDNs involved in teaching the public how to cook and prepare healthy food. An exploration of their perspectives can provide insights on the competencies needed for RDNs to effectively engage in culinary education, and inform the content addressed in training students as future nutrition educators.

This pilot study is part of a larger, ongoing investigation on the experiences of RDNs who teach nutrition through hands-on food preparation.

Objectives

To explore the perspectives of RDNs who teach cooking and food preparation to: (1.) identify the knowledge/skills they believe are needed to teach the public how to prepare healthy food, and compare with RDN competencies outlined by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' Food and Culinary Professionals (FCP) Dietetic Practice Group; and (2.) better understand their personal experiences learning to cook.



Methods

- **Research design:** Cross-sectional and qualitative
- **Participants:** RDNs (n=15) who teach cooking and food preparation through demonstrations, classes and/or one-on-one consultations
- **Recruitment:** Convenience sample from community settings, including private practice/consulting, supermarkets, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and SNAP-Ed
- **Data Collection:** Face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams
- **Analysis:** Interviews were recorded, transcripts were coded and recurring themes were summarized

Preliminary Findings

Knowledge & Skills Perceived as Necessary to Teach Cooking & Food Preparation: Recurring Themes Addressing FCP Core Competencies⁶

Basic Cooking Skills:

- Cooking equipment– selection & appropriate use
- Knife skills & safety
- Communicating cooking skills to “non-cooks”

.... I think knife skills are really important... I talk a lot about food safety in my cooking demos and classes... But then you know there might be some more specific skills depending on the recipe that we're doing.

...knowing what tool to use and when....so if you don't have a whisk to whisk, eggs, you could maybe say okay use a fork instead, or but just knowing what could substitute for what tool you need. I think is really important.

I would say for somebody who isn't good with public speaking it's a very challenging endeavor, teaching other people how to cook. Because, you know, you may not have the right wording or vocabulary to teach somebody else at that point if you're shy or... maybe you just you're uncomfortable talking to other people...

Communicating About Food:

- Selection of audience-appropriate messages
- Ability to present basic food demonstrations & presentation
- Working with & through the media- traditional & social media
- Public speaking
- Communicating the enjoyment of food

...one thing is that I really try to make food fun and approachable, and I think by people attending more classes they see how it gets easier for them to get in the kitchen...

...you do have that ability to teach them something, and to not get kind of caught up on if people are like "Oh I don't like that ingredient", or "Oh, I would never cook with that", or "I do it differently". You know just the mindset that there's different ways to cook and everybody grew up learning from somebody different, teaching themselves, different cultures. It's a very personal experience.

Cooking Techniques:

- Basic food preparation
- Dry & moist heat cooking techniques
- Food safety- cooking foods to appropriate temperature
- Techniques to improve status of nutrients & food groups recognized by Dietary Guidelines for Americans

...how you can make a balanced meal with all of the food groups is one of the things I hope that they take away when they finish up a program.

...I love that Choose My Plate model. I teach people in food groups, versus talking about vitamins and minerals and protein and carbs and everything because people eat food.

... just having some basic knife skills and knowing, the basic terms like sautéing, baking and broiling and grilling, and just kind of the basics of the usual kitchen. Just to know how certain foods should be prepared, kind of understand some of the basic temperatures to look for safety reasons.

...I would say, get comfortable in front of people and get comfortable in front of the camera...

Personal Experiences Learning to Cook

Emerging theme:

- Frequently cooking at home in early childhood

.... I would help my mom cook dinner. And then I'd say it was probably around like 16 or so that I would actually try to like make a meal and actually like chop up things and get involved to the point of, you know, preparing something as opposed to just like helping out.



So just from as long as I can remember both of my parents cooked regularly... and we were participants... in the kitchen helping.

Conclusions

- The skills and knowledge perceived by RDNs as most essential to effectively teach the public about food preparation reflected FCP competencies on basic cooking skills, cooking techniques and communicating about food.
- Cooking at home with family while growing up fostered interest and skills that inspired some RDNs to seek careers involving culinary education.
- Our findings merit research with a larger sample to better understand the competencies and characteristics of RDNs involved in culinary education in diverse settings.

References

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