



For Immediate Release

## **Food Literacy ~ a Lifelong Commitment**

By Mary V. Carver. P.H.Ec.

***In an ideal world, food education would begin in the home, be expanded throughout each grade in school and become a lifelong interest for all.***

Teaching young people to make nutritious food choices and giving them hands-on kitchen skills to create meals from scratch prepares them to lead healthy, independent lives – ultimately within a budget as they become ‘the breadwinners’ of tomorrow.

But who is providing food education?

Some parents tell us they “don’t have the time or patience – don’t want the mess – can’t cook (themselves) – or are too confused by conflicting nutrition messages,” to teach their own children to cook from scratch. Perhaps grandparents can help?

A November 2015 survey by Montreal-based Léger Marketing identified that meal preparation tends to be a last-minute task, with 65% of Canadian households deciding between 4-5 pm what’s for dinner tonight. Clearly, weekly menu planning is not routine for every family.

For parents, a lack of time is the culprit on many fronts. Two income families or single parents run in multiple directions. Most have evening chores, laundry catch-up, elderly parents to assist, homework to supervise. Meetings. Time to teach their kids to cook may not even be on their radar.

Parents tell us that just to sit down as a family at meal time can be a luxury. Due to extended work hours and long commute times, family meals have changed. Frequent snacking has replaced (or expanded) the traditional 3 meals per day. And more people eat alone at their desks.

Yet, parents do have an important role to play in supporting their child’s learning.

“Although the causes of obesity are complex, families have significant influence on children’s dietary habits and weight and should be involved in planning healthy living campaigns and efforts to curb food marketing that targets children,” says Dr. Barbara H Fiese, PhD., Professor, Human Development & Family Studies, University of Illinois.

So what happens if kids don’t learn to cook? They can grow up to be parents and role models who can’t cook. And the cycle repeats. They eat out of the home, often. They choose a diet of

fast or highly-processed food and prepared entrées - often with low intakes of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains. And do kids have the skills to choose the healthier options when they eat out or do they surrender to the marketing geared to them?

“Poor nutrition has adverse impacts on health, and increases the economic and social burden of chronic disease in Ontario,” reports the Ontario Public Health Association. Higher levels of sugar, sodium and fat in most prepared and processed food along with super-sized portions may be responsible for more health problems than we can count.

We hear repeatedly that obesity, Type II diabetes, and hypertension are on the rise in all age groups. Meanwhile, “fatty liver is a new epidemic,” says Dr. Linda Scully, a liver specialist at the Ottawa Hospital. “1 in 4 Canadians may be affected by liver disease due primarily to the rapidly rising prevalence of fatty liver disease linked to obesity, lack of physical activity and poor eating habits,” reports the [Canadian Liver Foundation](#).

Food literacy is a matter of having sufficient nutrition knowledge to make smart, affordable choices, enough time and cooking skills to prepare tasty, locally-sourced food from scratch, a commitment to reduce food waste and a respect for one’s health and safety. It does take time, planning and practice.

In April 2016, a \$60 million “renewed math strategy” was announced by Ontario Ministry of Education. Teachers scramble to improve provincial math scores. The Ontario Home Economics Association (OHEA) and other like-minded groups, think food literacy is equally important. Yes - math is a critical requirement for most jobs; but food is a necessity of life.

Age-appropriate cooking skills are woven throughout the curriculum in schools in Japan. Could Ontario kids not benefit from the same health opportunity?

A number of students already earn credits for food and nutrition courses offered through Family Studies curriculum in Ontario high schools, but, these excellent courses are not compulsory. Therefore, many kids miss out. Home Economists are concerned.

**Let’s inspire our youth to get in the kitchen and cook real food.**

OHEA has a growing online petition, with over 3100 signatures, to encourage the Government of Ontario, to make at least one food and nutrition course mandatory for all Ontario students. Sign the petition at: [www.food-literacy.ca](http://www.food-literacy.ca)

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is challenging families with a unique [Six by Sixteen](#) initiative. The goal is for youth to learn to cook six meals by 16 years of age. OHEA supports the project and its potential outcomes. OFA, in collaboration with its many partners, is posting simple [learn how to cook videos](#) using local, seasonal food on their website. For example, learn to make an omelette, turkey meatballs, to chop an onion or measure ingredients accurately.

Ontario Professional Home Economists encourage parents, and youth to tap into the above resources, to commit to family meal time and to enjoy the abundance and variety of food readily available within our agriculturally-rich province.

We owe it to our kids and grandkids to make a ‘real’ food literacy commitment for life!

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**Ontario Home Economics Association (OHEA)** a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life.

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