

Off the Grill Final Report 2015

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Grandview Woodland Food Connection

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Introduction	2 - 3
Activities	4 - 5
Evaluation Tools	6 - 9
Outcomes	10 - 13
Challenges	14
Lessons Learned	15



Introduction

We are happy to report another successful Off the Grill (OTG) youth meal program. After completing its third season this past summer, OTG is helping to foster positive relationships between the Grandview Woodland community and our Britannia teens based on mutual respect, meaningful engagement, and affirmative social connection all centered on a communal food sharing program.

Healthy eating is the main focus, though the program was much more and included the following three values:

1) Health Promotion

Britannia teens, many who are considered “vulnerable”, are either actively involved in running the program, including planning, food preparation, setup, serving, clean-up or are recipients of the meals. Nutritious meals prioritized proteins and veggies providing youth new understanding about healthy eating, built their cooking skills, and filled their bellies with good food.

The teens most involved in running OTG all reported new awareness of healthy eating. The feedback from the teens who are both helping to run the program and from those simply receiving food was that they appreciated the meals and enjoyed trying new foods like quinoa and salads.

OTG also promoted healthy social activity by creating both an empowering program for youth to learn valuable skills as well as a positive social space in the outdoor Britannia Centre plaza for friends, family, and community members to gather in a life affirming way.



2) Life Skills

Off the Grill teaches important life skills as part of running the meal program - planning, grocery shopping, preparing food, serving customers, setting up the space and cleaning up afterwards. These skills are all needed to making healthy food choices and to develop into healthy individuals. They are also added to resumes providing the teens a head start when job seeking.

From our observations and discussions with teens, many are entirely unfamiliar with healthy foods and basic nutrition that most of us take for granted. OTG has opened their minds to healthy eating with some reporting that they are cooking more at home and trying out recipes that they learned at OTG.

3) Community Building

By situating OTG in the Britannia plaza where youth congregate, community members passing by are invited to have a meal, thereby helping to establish positive connection between the youth and community members where previously misunderstanding existed. These teens want to be seen and known, they definitely do not want to be disliked and misunderstood.

For many of the youth, the act of serving food and to feel useful in the community was a very positive experience and gave our young friends a much needed feeling of belonging and inclusion in their neighborhood. Many youth also remarked that they met people through OTG that they would otherwise not have met.



Activities

Off the Grill is part of a year round focus on healthy eating for youth which includes a regular snack program through the year and then when the weather improves, the outdoor twice weekly OTG meal program that ran from mid May until the end of September. As the name suggests, we cook on a BBQ that worked to create a lively food event.

Weekly light snacks of veggie, fruit plates, soups and smoothies were prepared with the help of a volunteer through the winter season. These snacks supplemented two regular weekly teen cooking programs, helping keep the youth nourished through the week. Food prep was kept simple, offering the youth as an easy way to have been involved.

Off the Grill planning was initiated in early May and brought together a group of about 10 youth who were tasked to help plan and run the program under the leadership of the OTG coordinator. This coordinator was someone the youth were familiar with and was essential to ensuring and supporting the youth involvement. Planning topics included program scheduling, menus, activities, participation expectation and incentives, and roles and responsibilities.



Off the Grill officially kicked off mid May. Volunteer chef mentors were recruited who helped with menu planning. The program coordinator and sometimes youth (If they were out of school) would purchase the food, then the youth with the chef prepared the dinner, typically washing and cutting veggies, making various salads, and cutting meat all the while talking about healthy eating, recipes, and food prep techniques.

Tables with brightly colored table cloths and chairs were brought out along with the BBQ. Tents and games were set up creating a festive space. Participating youth then served the meals and collected money (youth ate for free, community adults paid \$5). And finally, the youth helped clean up.

A final Off the Grill evaluation was organized with the participating youth (see below).



Off the Grill evaluation was conducted throughout the program and also included stats keeping and a final participant dialogue.

1) On-Going Reflection

Several informal on-going meetings were held with participating youth, staff, and other adult supports to address questions such as how the program is going? Do we need to change directions? What is working and what needs changing? On-going reflection acknowledged that we were always learning and that goals and objectives were fluid as per youth needs. Key to the success of this evaluation was ensuring that the youth took ownership of the program and to a large extent, we relied on their feedback throughout.

A selection of discussion points included the following:

- The need to clarify program values and goals given multiple focuses. This could influence how the program is organized. Do we focus more on skill building or healthy food provision? Nutrition, skill building and community connection are all important values.
- Need to rely less on the volunteer chefs. It is better that they do not shop, but rather focus on food prep and skill building or mentorship. It is important that the youth prepare the food as much as possible.
- How can we see more linkage to social services? It is difficult to track who and how the youth are connecting with services. It is difficult for the youth to report, on say connection to community. Hard to track these outcomes. A case study approach would work well.
- Want more activities associated with OTG to attract youth, things like games or ping pong
- OTG provides a safety net for the youth. Helps build relations. Youth workers are able to get bits of youth information, which, for example, helps if kids show up at hospital.
- Where does OTG fit into the Circle of Care model? Can we get more support from MCFD considering that we are working with vulnerable youth.
- Youth engagement, leadership, and ensuring the program is youth driven are important. Youth feel a sense of belonging, pride, and self-confidence because their opinions are valued.
- Youth would be delegated key responsibilities and decision-making. OTG is really great at meeting the youth where they are at. Barriers to participation are eliminated and relationships with the youth are built on their own terms.

- There is a great openness of all those involved. The program really feels youth centred. Seeing the youth more involved keeps the staff interested. There is a sharing of work and it is important to build youth leadership and allowing the youth to lead by example.
- A plan or more resources are needed to deal with older problem youth. It is a balance between supporting all youth regardless of circumstance and providing a safe space for the younger teens.
- We want to see creative cooking. Try not to cook the same thing. Maybe try things like baking. Community seems to really like the food and value. Is affordable for many people.
- Youth incentives are important to reward work done. Youth who put in a certain amount of hrs would be rewarded with small honorariums or gift cards. Skill building and resume building considered an important incentive. Talk of collaborating with local restaurants to provide employment after the program. Youth would all be provided a certificate of completion.
- It is important that we have clear communication between youth staff and program coordinator, things like menu planning, which youth would be helping, any pre-planning needed. Best to create a weekly plan, including any special events.
- Many of the original youth targeted by the program when it started have either moved on or are hanging out elsewhere. Also less outreach workers around, perhaps due to many youth being more dispersed this year. Many are hanging out a Lynn valley this summer.
- Staff and other adult supports are reporting longer conversations with youth as trust is built. More conversations around food and the youth who are around seem more willing to engage in conversation which is less forced, more spontaneous.
- Opportunities to interact with the community are important. Community residents are spending more time with the youth and getting a better sense of who they are and are happy to support the youth and the food program. The youth are talking more, seem friendlier, and adults reporting they are getting to know the youth better.
- Some of the youth are feeling some resentment towards other youth who are eating for free but unwilling to help with the program. We don't want to make engagement a barrier to eating healthy but will find ways to reward those youth who do help. All youth should get free meals no matter what.
- The youth are doing less shopping in part due to school conflict. It is good to get the youth shopping more as they learn so much, like budgeting skills.

2) Stats Recording

64

dinners prepared

644

youth served meals

600

Community meals
were served
(non-youth)

601

youth hrs

376

adult volunteer hrs

106

GWFC Coordinator
hrs

3) Final Participant Dialogue

A wrap up evaluation dialogue lasting approximately one hour was held with 10 of the most involved youth in OTG. This dialogue elicited highly informative and interesting responses from the youth and thus, our most valuable evaluation tool. It was audio recorded and edited into an 18.5 minute digital slide show format (link provided below) with an edited transcript attached. The following questions were asked:

1. What did you like most about OTG?
2. Can you remember a favorite moment?
3. What did you learn?
4. Do you think that your cooking skills have improved?
5. Are you cooking more at home?
6. Do you have a better understanding of healthy eating?
7. How would you describe the cooking at OTG?
8. How do you think OTG benefited the community?
9. How would you describe OTG in a few words?
10. If you were the boss, what would you do to make OTG better?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XCDB5J8DMs>



Outcomes

1. Youth will have increased access to nutritious food and fostering of healthy food knowledge

Teens are exposed to foods that they may not ordinarily eat. This is perhaps most notable in the number of teens who now enjoy eating salads as compared to when OTG started and who now understand the importance of veggies for good health. Of those youth most involved in the program, all reported learning more about healthy eating.

Youth expressed more cooking confidence. “I just recently cooked last week for the first time in my life at home (laugh). I got some hamburger helper and made steak and eggs. So actually I learned how to cook the steak from Off the Grill. I would rather eat more at home than eating out. Like the salads that they always served...we always had different salads and that was one of the main portions of food served. I know I can cook, but I just need to learn more”. Another youth replied “I know I am for sure (cooking at home). I just cooked Shepard’s pie at home and the other night I cooked steak fajitas (served at OTG)”. Several youth reported cooking more food at home though this still proves a challenge. One young woman who is much more aware about healthy eating said that “I would like to but it is kind of hard cause I live on my own and I find it hard to cook healthy food for just one person. I find it pointless cooking for myself. I eat, I just don’t eat healthy”.

Youth have a better understanding of what healthy eating means. “I would say a lot more to do with vegetables. So I haven’t touched vegetables to cook before or to add to certain foods. I feel a lot more confident to cook at home. I am not cooking much at home, but I am cooking more than before”. Another youth replied, “not eating foods that have grease in it. So eating



more fruits and vegetables and stuff that would take more than 20 minutes to cook”. “I think I do. I just don’t do it, but I know what I need to do. It is better to buy stuff fresh stuff from the store, not just frozen dinners”, said another youth.

2. Youth participate in the planning and implementation of the program building their leadership and life skills.

Youth learned new skills by being involved in OTG. Not surprisingly, knife skills topped their list. “I learned how to cut up potatoes and boil them. I also learned how to cut different stuff and not cut my fingers off”. Preparing different menus also gave the teens exposure to foods they would ordinarily never prepare and being a creative cook. “I actually learned a lot about food because I am not the healthiest eater as well. Anna would tell you, okay if you can’t use onion, you can use this or that. She made a crazy meal out of nothing. She kinda taught us that you don’t need every ingredient to make it taste good. There are other substitutes that you could use, like paprika”.

Other skills included shopping. “It is important to learn how to shop. I liked when I went shopping and once we went all the way to Kingsway to get food and I found that really helpful”. Or customer service, which was a favorite. “I learned more customer service skills and advertising. I tried to get a lot of people to come and it is so hard and now I know how annoying it is when people ignore you”.

Perhaps most importantly, the youth worked well as a team. They mostly showed up and put the work in. They took ownership of the program and were proud to be active and involved, showing themselves to be role models for other Britannia teens.



3. Youth will experience quality engagement hours among youth and adults through food preparation, serving, and youth worker connections.

OTG fostered social connection by creating engaging activity that brought youth and other community together. This was also about moving beyond negative youth stereotypes and involving youth in pro-social activity. Apart from enjoying the food, the youth seemed to really enjoy serving the food and with that, meeting the community. “I liked that we got to see who was in our community, I felt helpful and everyone seem to enjoy it”. And another responded that “meeting new people, seeing the community seeing youth do well with food and seeing that the community was getting more interested in what the youth were doing and asking questions”.

Off the Grill provided a good opportunity for adult supports to connect with kids in a relaxed space. These supports included youth outreach workers, drug and alcohol counsellors, library staff, police, and others, with some of these supports reporting that OTG enabled them to have more relaxed and spontaneous conversations with the youth.

4. Off the Grill will create a safe, inclusive space where youth congregate.

Off the Grill created a lively space in the outdoor plaza where the teens could eat well and enjoy themselves, and also a welcoming space for other community members to share a meal with the youth. “We tried to get a lot of the kid’s families together. That was one of our biggest goals for the summer was getting people out into the community, to interact in the community, to even meet new people in the community. I also liked meeting so many people in the community and hearing people’s different stories”. Another young woman responded, “I liked the end when we stopped serving people and I got to interact with the kids. There was this little girl that was super cute and she was so sad when she had to leave”. For most of the youth, the hanging out with friends and socializing was their favorite part of OTG.



The plaza where large groups of teens regularly gathered had not been without complaint from residents that the teens were causing problems. Indeed, the teens were more of a danger to themselves but engaged in risky behavior which scared some community members. In turn, OTG helped to quieten fears of the youth while also providing youth a positive activity. “OTG makes Britannia look better cause there is a lot of stuff that happens here that is not too good”, said one young woman. She was particularly moved by the generosity of the community. “I liked when the guy donated \$100 after we were explaining what we do at OTG and it felt so nice because he liked what we did. And then after that I looked out for him every day but could not find him”. The coordinator remarked, “I think the community saw the changes in the youth. They always asked questions about what we were doing and why and what it was for and they said we always did a good job and they saw the kids doing something to be helpful with the community”.

5. Increased multi-sectoral collaboration will strengthen community capacity to respond to the needs of our youth.

Food is perhaps the most basic way to connect and build emotional safety with the youth. This is why we invited various youth supports to join us for the twice weekly meals. In so doing, OTG helped achieve several goals beyond simple meal provision. It is a holistic approach that values healthy youth social development inclusive of the physical, emotional, social and cultural. Food is the anchor but providing supports to become healthy adults is the prime goal.

Most local youth workers are familiar with OTG and attend, some more frequently than others, to connect with the kids. All have remarked how valuable OTG is and the opportunity to sit down and chat with youth over a meal. Adults build stronger relations and learn more about the teens and in turn the teens learn more about available programs and resources.



Challenges

1. While many cooking and other skills (e.g. shopping) were imparted on the youth, time constraints often limited the extent of teaching. Skill building was informal, perhaps as it needed to be.
2. Some of the higher risk youth targeted by OTG found new hangouts away from Britannia or the presence of so many more adults scared them away. As a consequence, less youth supports were present as compared to the first year and the program focus was more about skill building for those youth who ran the program (high risk themselves) than direct meal provision to other higher risk teens.
3. Volunteer chefs (we had 4), while great overall, were not always available for the time needed. Ideally funds are provided to pay a chef and maintain consistent staffing without a lot of juggling schedules and finding replacements.
4. The youth most involved felt some resentment towards other teens who ate for free but never helped with the program. It was important to respect those that helped with various incentives including small honorariums, movie passes and other perks.
5. Increased staffing and resources to help organize more youth activities may attract more youth to the space. It is important that the youth feel safe and comfortable at the centre and also a valuable opportunity for youth supports to help keep the teens safe.



Lessons Learned



Centering the program around nutritious food benefits community and for the youth is comforting, celebratory, and supports food security for youth.



A low barrier program allows numerous opportunities for teens to engage depending on ability. Teens appreciate the chance to help out, and it benefits their self esteem.



Strong staff leadership based on trust and recognition is essential to ensuring youth participation and follow through.



The broader community appreciates inexpensive and nutritious meals and these become an important point of connection between the youth and community.



By engaging teens in the various aspects of this community BBQ we can impart both life skills and practical knowledge about health and nutrition.



As the teens get used to adult connections, the length of conversations with teens increase and communications are less forced and more spontaneous.



Food provision near the Teen Centre is a great point of access, encouraging teens to use Teen Centre facilities and programming.



Transforming the community space to allow mixing for people of all ages, backgrounds, and sectors allows all to come together to support youth. There is an essential social service happening by supporting teens emotionally and nutritionally. There is opportunity for professional and community dialogue about teenagers in the public sphere.

Thank you Off the Grill supporters:

Britannia Community Centre, Teen Centre, and Library

Grandview Woodland Food Connection

BC Children's Hospital Responsive Intersectoral Children Health Education and Research (RICHER) Initiative

WATARI Youth Outreach

Red Fox

Network of Inner City Community Services Society

Boys & Girls Club Odyssey II

NutritionLink