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Maestra Natura: A nutrition education program tested for efficacy in Italian children

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Introduction: The prevalence of paediatric overweight/obesity is a public health problem worldwide. Educational programs have been carried out in the last few years in Italy. However, their real effectiveness is still uncertain. Maestra Natura (MN) is an innovative education program implemented by our institute to fill the gaps in children knowledge on nutritional issues overcoming possible gender differences. It has been tested from 2012 to 2017 in six Italian regions by involving 20000 students aged 6-13.

Aim: To assess the effectiveness of MN program in enabling children to transfer the food pyramid contents in a practical context and to highlight possible gender differences in dietary habits.

Methodology: The didactic contents were distributed by a web platform to about 1000 students of primary school (V class) and secondary-first level school (second class). Dietary habits were assessed by a validated questionnaire. The students were required to organize a weekly meal planner before and after the completion of the educational programs. Each menu was evaluated on the basis of established criteria to reward the insertion of fruit, vegetables, legumes and fish and to penalize the wrong use of protein food.

Results: Data collected evidenced gender differences in behaviours/eating habits. In addition, females had better basic nutrition knowledge than males; interestingly, this difference disappeared at the end of the didactic path. Significant differences between the beginning and the end of the scholastic year were found in terms of student knowledge.

Conclusions: The MN program was effective in transferring information contained in the food pyramid to the real context of a daily menu. Furthermore, MN program was able to fill the gender-driven gap in nutrition knowledge. This activity favored a greater awareness on the importance of having appropriate dietary habits.

Biography

Annalisa Silenzi has been studying the role of dietary components in the pathogenesis, prevention and treatment of pathologies with dietary-nutritional risk factors such as obesity, type II diabetes and cancer. Specifically, her studies has been focusing on the mechanisms of action exerted by dietary polyphenols and n3/n6 fatty acids by studying their biological properties and effects in *in vivo*, *ex vivo* and *in vitro* systems. For many years she has been involved in nutrition education programs addressed to primary and secondary first level school children and in the promotion of healthy lifestyles among young and adult people.

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