



Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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Together We Eat

The Community Foundation of Greater Peterborough's 2015 Vital Signs report noted that having a sense of belonging strengthens community and makes us healthier, happier and more resilient. The report found that being marginalized or excluded can result in members of our community feeling less welcome and having fewer opportunities to participate. Greater Peterborough's sense of belonging has decreased 9.8% since 2003, and while 75% of people from higher income households reported a strong or somewhat strong sense of community belonging in 2011-12, only 61% of people living in lower income households felt the same way.

Something has been cooking in Peterborough to strengthen our community's sense of inclusion. It's coming out of the kitchens currently being used by the Nourish Project, together with partners like the YWCA Peterborough Haliburton, New Canadians Centre (NCC), Nogojiwanong Friendship Centre and Peterborough Public Health to bring people together, thanks to support from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

So far, there have been community dinners like the one hosted at the NCC or the one at Trinity United Church. Diners shared memories about "comfort foods" in their cultural traditions and provided insights into what food teaches us about human relationships. There was interest in learning more about "Canadian" foods which led to the inclusion of wild rice, three sisters teachings (squash, corn and beans), and blueberries at the meals. It was great to see NCC youth, newcomers to our area, volunteer with Nourish staff to prepare and serve at these events. And since then, there has been more food-centred follow-up: Nourish has facilitated a more in-depth experiential study of wild rice, from production to harvesting to meal preparation. The premise of all this work is that food can help people feel a greater sense of belonging to each other and to their local environment.

With the harvest now making October a month of abundance and thanksgiving, we have much to celebrate. Often in nutrition practice it's easy to focus on the "what" of eating – are you following Canada's Food Guide? Is there a whole grain on the table? Do you have enough dark green or orange vegetables? But growing research is showing that along with the importance of what we eat, it's important to focus on the *how we eat meals*. We know from our school nutrition programs that *eating together* has its advantages. In fact, Health Canada conducted a consultation on new Guiding Principles and Recommendations for the development of Canada's next Food Guide earlier this year and one of the key principles that has emerged is "Knowledge and skills are needed to navigate the complex food environment and support healthy eating".



The recommendations to support this principle include the sharing of meals with family or friends whenever possible.

There are many health promotion campaigns that focus on eating together, whether it's families, adults or seniors. Research shows that children who eat with their family at least once a day not only eat better and more, but also do better at school, understand better their family values and traditions, deepen their sense of belonging, and are less likely to smoke, use drugs or attempt suicide.¹

All of this research supports the work of this Nourish project. Food is a great way to bring people together in ways that benefit our community and the health of all its members.

Learn more about Nourish programming dedicated to eating, cooking, growing, and advocating for good food and how this work cultivates health, builds community and promotes fairness at sites across our region by visiting www.nourishproject.ca. Peterborough Public Health is proud to be a Nourish partner.

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>
