Technology Use and Preferences of Paraprofessional Educators in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)

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Background

Low-income families face many challenges and reaching them via traditional face-to-face nutrition education in a series of lessons can be difficult. Technology could help nutrition educators stay connected to program participants for longer periods of time. This study investigated access, use, and preferences for technologies of paraprofessional educators providing direct nutrition education to low income families/youth in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Technology use and preferences differed considerably between states and sample size was not large enough to be representative of the nation. Understanding technology preferences and use by EFNEP educators might aid in developing strategies to improve retention and graduation from EFNEP by strategic use of technology to augment engagement of participants.

Goal

Develop a better understanding about technology use and preferences of EFNEP paraprofessional educators to inform the feasibility of incorporating targeted technology in EFNEP programming.

Methodology

A 26-item survey instrument was developed with questions related to technology use, frequency of use, location where technology was accessed, preferred platforms, reason for accessing different devices, and demographic information such as ethnicity, gender and years of education of paraprofessional educators. The survey was based on questions used in past surveys administered to low income individuals and reviewed by a group of experts. It was administered to EFNEP paraprofessional educators, in three states; Maryland, Illinois and Kansas.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the University of Maryland, College Park, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and Kansas State University prior to administering the surveys. Educators were provided the opportunity to respond online or using pencil and paper.

Results

Data indicate that 88% of educators used a computer every day and accessed the device from their place of work; 92% sent and received texts from their mobile device and 73% used a Smartphone to download applications. A majority used Android devices; 91% of educators accessed the internet each day; 84% reported that they have high speed internet where they live; 98% use the internet to access nutrition information with healthy eating, recipes and exercise tips as the most popular internet topics. 85% of educators also used social media with Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube representing the most popular sites.

Conclusions and implications

All three states reported that a high percentage of EFNEP paraprofessional educators use technology. Almost all paraprofessionals reported the use of internet to access nutrition information, thereby indicating the great potential to incorporate targeted technology into EFNEP programming to increase participant retention and graduation.

Due to limitations of the sample size and differences in educator preferences for technology use, the methods for incorporating technology into these programs need to be studied further. A better understanding of educators’ comfort level with technology, training needs and ways to effectively incorporate technology into teaching is needed.

Future pilot studies may be beneficial to determine how to include technology into the EFNEP model while maintaining the integrity of the peer-educator model and program.