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Veggies4myHeart – educational project to promote vegetable knowledge and consumption in preschoolers

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Vegetable consumption among children is below recommended. Given the critical role of vegetable consumption in health promotion, it is essential to identify effective strategies to promote this intake. The Veggies4myHeart project aims to increase vegetable knowledge and consumption in preschool children through nutrition education strategies (NES). Veggies4myHeart is a prospective longitudinal study with children aged 2 to 6 years who attend preschools in the Leiria district. A questionnaire was applied to the parents to characterize the sample. NES were used: children's story, digital game, vegetable-themed sticker booklet and the food wheel. The intervention consisted of 5 food education sessions, each focusing on one selected vegetable (lettuce, carrot, red cabbage, cucumber, and tomato). Sessions to assess knowledge and consumption of vegetables were held pre-and post-intervention. Knowledge was evaluated through a taxonomic categorization questionnaire. Consumption was assessed by recording the number of portions of each vegetable consumed. Wilcoxon test was used to compare pre-and post-intervention vegetable knowledge and consumption. ANOVA test was used to compare NES. Between 2018 and 2024,

649 children (52,5% female, mean age $4,36 \pm 0,942$) from 17 preschools participated. After the intervention, there was a statistically significant increase in vegetable knowledge ($p < 0,001$) and a statistically significant increase in the consumption of vegetables ($p < 0,001$). There are statistically significant differences between NES, with the digital game having greater vegetable knowledge ($p < 0,001$) and consumption ($p < 0,001$) than the others. The Veggies4myHeart project effectively increased vegetable knowledge and consumption in preschoolers. It is essential to continue the intervention to promote consumption and familiarity with vegetables, as well as the involvement of parents and preschool teachers, due to their prominent role as models for acquiring healthy eating habits.

Key messages:

- The NES used proved useful, contributing to increased knowledge and consumption of vegetables.
- The Veggies4myHeart project is an asset for preschool-aged children to become familiar with vegetables.