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Teaching Children How to Like Balanced Meals

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Teaching Children How to Like Balanced Meals

By

Harumi Norasakkunkit

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for

Master of Arts

In

Graphic Design

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Abstract

Growing up in Japan, balanced meals were always provided at home, at schools and even at restaurants. Unfortunately, children are not going to choose balanced meals from the start, so this habit has to be instilled by parents and by the educational system until it eventually becomes a personal preference for children. If children are simply given the choice to eat whatever they want from the beginning, it is unlikely that this preference will ever be developed. The emphasis of nurturing the habit of eating balanced meals, rather than just eating preferred foods, is what is particular about Japanese parenting.

As a graphic designer, I developed graphically oriented learning materials that would help children to personally prefer having a balanced meal every time and help them distinguish each food groups. I created images and characters, which will appeal to children and have a positive influence on their long-term eating habits. These learning materials will help children to develop an instinctual reaction that something is wrong when they see a plate of food that is disproportionate in the food groups or unbalanced in general. These materials will be marketed as a set with my brand name.

Through my project I learned how to conduct a survey, analyze the result, and develop my critical thinking to link it to my creative productions. During the process of creation, I learned what appearance, shapes and colors may attract children and knew how to adjust the usability toward the different age groups. I recently completed a website and I hope I will get more feedback from viewers and users so I can improve the existing products and add more additional products.

The Background

Time constraints and other priorities of modern life have made it much more likely for parents to rely on fast, processed food rather than fresh and balanced foods, which are time-consuming and more costly to gather and prepare. I started wondering if this problem increased over generations due to modernity, rather than being a cultural issue. However, I found data on obesity rates in the world.

According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. has the highest rate (30.6 %) of obesity in the world (OECD, 2005). Approximately 12.5 million children and adolescents aged 2—19 years are obese. Like the US, Japan, also faces similar challenges of modernity. However, Japan has a much lower rate (3.6 %) of obesity. This is because Japanese still follow a routine balanced diet of rice, vegetables, and protein (fish or meat). When I was a student, my mother, who worked full time, always made Bento, a Japanese lunch box. A Bento looks quite different from what you see in the U.S. school lunches, because a Bento contains rice as the biggest portion with smaller portions of different foods, which makes it a balanced lunch. Even if people are busier in modern life, they can still find time and make an effort to cook a simple balance meal or choose balanced combination of foods when eating out, as long as the idea of a balanced meal is as much of a priority as other important aspects of parenting. In other words, it is all about what people prioritize. If they are frequently exposed to the importance of balanced meals, they are likely to prioritize eating balanced meals even when they have to eat out. Eating balanced meals was part of my everyday life. Japanese children are typically exposed to the idea of balanced meals through frequent exposure and conventions of eating, as well as through making Bentos visually appealing. Therefore, my goal was to try to visually capture the essence of balanced meals in my products.

Survey

Since so much of the problem in eating habits among children today is connected to the modern lifestyle which influences what, when, and how children eat, I decided to conduct a survey to test whether such lifestyle issues really are connected to how balanced typical meals are for children. I surveyed 34 parents, who had children ages 3-12 about what their children typically ate at home, how long their children took to finish eating meals, and how children and the parents interacted during meals.

Overall, the results confirm my hypothesis that the modern lifestyle is not favorable to having children typically eat balanced meals and developing healthy eating habits. In particular, the frequency of eating frozen or microwavable food was a strong predictor of not having balanced meals. Also, children who had more balanced meals tended to have more family interactions during meals (which tended to occur more in families with fewer children and in families where children less frequently got to choose what they eat), spent more time eating their meals, and were given instructions by parents on how to conduct themselves during meals.

Methodology

From the result of the survey, I wanted to create illustrated characters that children would like and show characters eating balanced meals with family members while having conversations at the table. Even though there are so many educational materials, including picture books, posters, brochures, videos, and games, about child nutrition and having a balanced diet, children still go for unhealthy or unbalanced diet. I found this is because there is no set of educational materials with different approaches but the same message to teach children about the importance of balanced nutrition. Usually the message of materials is very meaningful, powerful and efficient, but if the design does not go well with the content or is not cohesive and sophisticated for the brand package, it may diminish the effectiveness of my products. If there is a lot of information in the educational material, it is also hard to get to the main point. Messages should be short and straightforward.

I decided to create set of educational materials with friendly characters to appeal to children. I also wanted to make those character cohesively introduce a message. I tried to differentiate from those existing graphically inaccurate examples and tried to incorporate the knowledge I gained though my research and my graphic design skills. The brand name could be totally unique and exotic with foreign words. I decided to use Bento for my brand name since the concept is “teaching balanced meals.” Bento can be a main character for all the products too. It has a square body with hands, legs and a face.

Inspiration

Before I started creating own characters, I conducted a survey of what cartoon characters are popular among children age 3-12 in the U.S. They are Sponge Bob, Dora, Disney characters, Max and Ruby, Curious George, Dr. Seuss, Pinkelious and Purplicious, Hanna Montana, Star Wars, Finding Nemo, The Incredibles, and Kung Fu Panda. Those characters have different appearances, yet most of them look friendly and have unique facial expressions. I tried to draw on these characters to create similar characters and also introduce original unique characters by applying Japanese style of illustrations. According to Japanese psychologist, Masao Yokota (1999), who compared the differences between Japanese illustrated characters and the U.S. illustrated characters, most Japanese characters have the same pattern of round faces and small mouths (infant-like look), while U.S. illustrated characters are more individually unique and tend to look more mature (i.e., less-infant-like). I tried to bring this Japanese style to my own characters. Another feature of Japanese illustrated characters is to have friendly and subtle facial expressions that are made from simple shapes. The famous Japanese character, Hello Kitty, is an example of this. I tried to incorporate these features into my Bento Balance characters as well.

After looking at examples of popular illustrated characters, I sketched many versions of own characters. I tried to use different mediums such as watercolor, cut out papers, charcoal and felt. I put all the process together, sketches, feedbacks, reactions, and thoughts, and made a process book. That way I could easily go back to the old ideas and reused or refine them. I scanned the drawing, manipulated the lines and shapes and added some colors by using a design software such as Adobe Illustrator or Photoshop. I showed rough drafts to people including little children and I refined the design according to their opinions or advice. My products have a wide range of forms from 2D print works to animations. This is because I wanted children to try different mediums but still get the same message from them. Those different mediums will be placed in various locations in

children’s everyday lives to teach children to like balanced meals. This strategy will physically remind children that they should eat a balanced and proportionally reasonable meal any time they eat a meal.

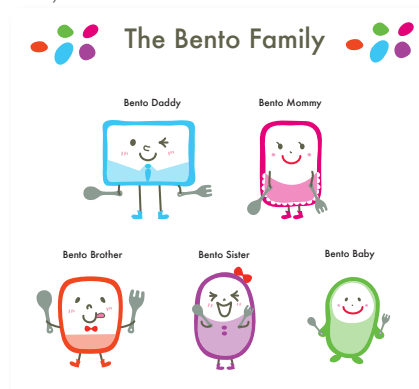
BENTO balance Products’ images

1. Logo



It represents a Bento box with balanced foods.

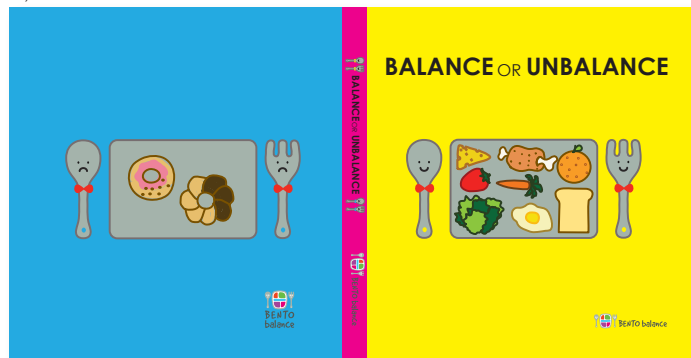
2-1) Main characters



2-2) Sub characters

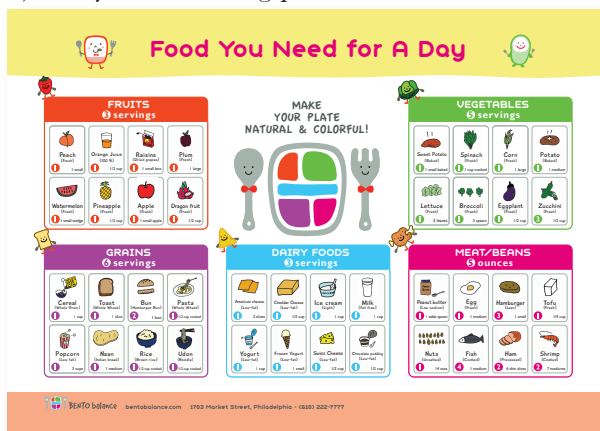


3) Children’s book



It has 28 pages including the cover pages. Children can learn the vocabulary and get an idea that eating balance is associated with good experiences.

4) Daily food serving poster



This poster teaches what portion of each food group is needed for a day. Each food group shows examples of food items and how much is for a daily serving. The parents can use this as a guide to make a menu for a day. The young children who cannot read yet can recognize the food through illustrations.

5) Food alphabet poster



Children can learn alphabet, food names, and food groups. This poster gives a message to have a variety of food everyday. This introduces exotic international foods as well, such as Ethiopian Injera bread, Indian Naan bread, Japanese Udon noodle. I want the children to appreciate the culture of diverse foods and be curious about the different foods.

6) T-shirt Design



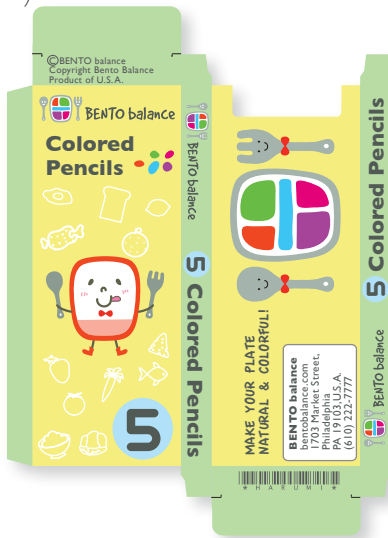
7) Food grouping card game



This is an educational card game that the parents and the children can play together. The children can recognize the food and try to sort out into the different food groups. This can be a simple math practice for older children and they can add numbers to meet adequate amounts of each food group.



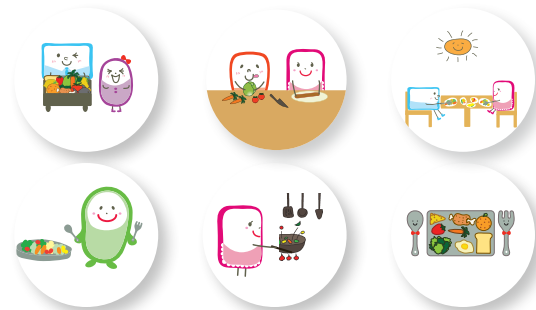
8) Pencils case



9) Holiday card

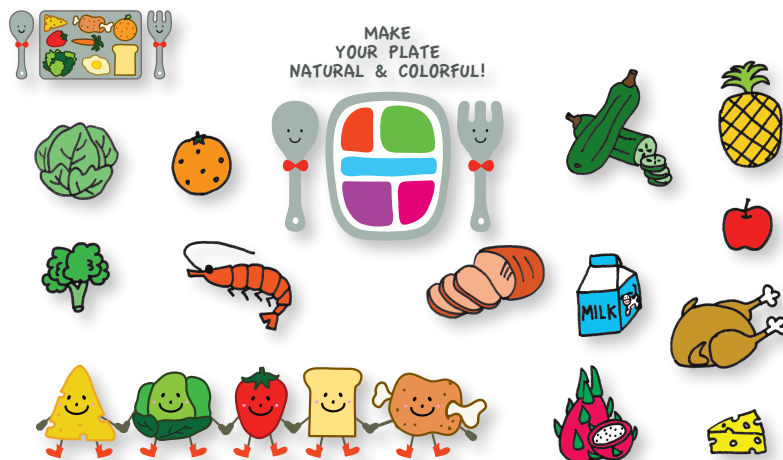


10) buttons



◀ If the children eat a balanced meal, they will be given these buttons or stickers as rewards. It's focusing on positive reinforcement.

11) Stickers

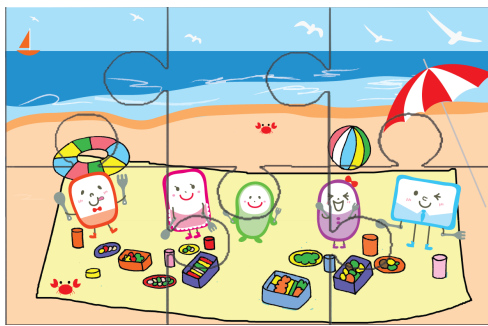


12) lunch mat

Children place a lunch mat on a table whenever they eat. These lunch mats remind them to eat balanced meals.



13) Puzzle



◀ A positive family interaction with balanced healthy food is illustrated. Children learn how to connect the image next to and get a sense of having healthy balanced meal.

14) Worksheet

WORKSHEET #1 DATE: _____
NAME: _____

BENTO balance
FIND A FOOD ITEM!

The Bento family is sad, because some food items are missing.
Can you find the missing food item for each family member to make him/her happy?
HINT: Each family member needs to eat from all five (5) food groups:
Grains, Veggies, Fruits, Dairy and Meats

WORKSHEET #2 DATE: _____
NAME: _____

BENTO balance
FOOD GROUPING GAME!

Circle 6 GRAINS with PURPLE!
Circle 5 VEGGIES with GREEN!
Circle 3 FRUITS with RED!
Circle 3 DAIRIES with BLUE!
Circle 5 MEATS with PINK!

WORKSHEET #3 DATE: _____
NAME: _____

BENTO balance
CUT & PASTE!

Here is an empty BENTO box. You need to fill the BENTO box with different kinds of food.
Cut out each food item below with scissors to make a balanced lunch!

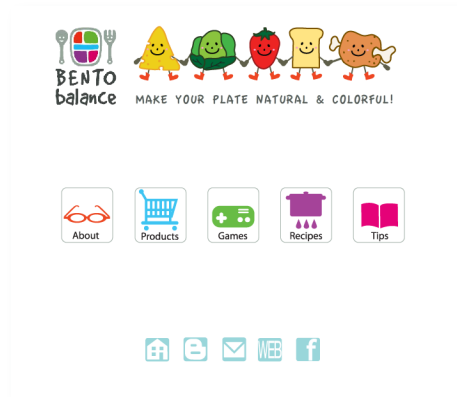
15) Food grouping flash game

BENTO balance Drag a food character into the same food group!

BENTO balance Drag a food character into the same food group!

BENTO balance Drag a food character into the same food group!

16) Website (www.bentobalance.com)



17) Blog (http://bentobalance.blogspot.com)



18) Facebook (http://facebook.com/bentobalance)



19) Recipes



<http://youtu.be/uDNhoTxkJLc>



<http://youtu.be/IVWuxlEBqjU>



<http://youtu.be/sFM7Hkzde44>



<http://youtu.be/Mnu4QHGBAHM>

Strategy

I had a consultation with a young American entrepreneur, Andrew Badger, who gives language lessons and sells his e-books online (personal communication, December 3rd, 2011). His business model is unique and probably will fit well in modern society. His advice can be very useful for those who want to start a business and maintain low cost. I will initiate his business model for my BENTO balance promotion.

According to Badger, in order to sell my products to parents, I can show part of the products on YouTube and see the people's reactions. I can always adjust and refine the products along with reviewers' comments. I should also search for similar products and see how others are doing. I created five recipe videos and released them on YouTube and I got a few comments already. I will create promotion videos of BENTO balance products and release them on YouTube. I will get subscribers by searching for similar videos and sending e-mail to those subscribers to introduce my products. Badger suggested, instead of setting up an information booth at any local events to explain my products to people, I could spread the ideas to people through social networking tools such as YouTube and Facebook, which is faster and more cost efficient. That way I do not need to have a place to sell. Instead of making actual products, it is easier to make others make them. I also found a company that can produce products; <http://www.cafepress.com/make/personalized-gifts> to my specifications as orders come in.

I am so fascinated by the power of YouTube. There are so many viewers and many of them make comments. Some people make a business out of it. It is a fast and cheap way to advertise products and services. I would like to showcase my products as much as I can and I am hoping that parents will purchase the products for their children and, once purchased, the children will see what a tasty balanced meal looks like, when they are exposed to my products. Hopefully, frequent exposure to my products will lead them towards a tendency to make better food choices without necessarily educating them about nutrition at the explicit, conscious level.

Conclusion

In modern days, we are surrounded by a lot of information and we have easy access to sources like the Internet to get this information, sometimes including bad ones such as pornographic, pirated and fraudulent content. Children are easily influenced by what they see and what they hear. Adults have to provide good educational sources for children. However, even if the content has a good idea, if its design is not effective nor attractive, children will not receive the message. Young children get a message more easily visually than verbally. Big food industries manipulate children to make them want unhealthy, unbalanced food by using attractive visuals. Many nutritionists and dietitians have great knowledge to educate children about nutrition and balanced diet, but many of them do not have a sense of design to attract children visually. I believe that those professionals need to work with designers to provide information more effectively.

Growing up in Japan where the culture teaches balanced meals, having a teaching license of home economics where I gained knowledge about nutrition, working with children and studying graphic design for many years, I strongly believe that I am able to provide scientifically supported information with attractive graphics to make an impact on children and change their eating habits. By using social media such as website and YouTube, I am targeting parents who have potential to buy my products. Therefore, I am releasing recipe videos to catch parents who are looking for easy recipes for children. I hope my products will make children and their parents, caretakers and educators rethink and change children's eating habits. Balanced meals give children good health, energy, creativity, culture, artistic elements and more. Children who grow up eating balanced meals will win over bad temptations of eating unbalanced or unhealthy food while successfully resisting powerful corporate advertisements which promote such tempting foods.

References

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005). Health Statistic:

Obesity by Country. Retrieved March 31st, 2012, from <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/index.html>

Yokota, M. (1996). The Comparison of Animation Characters of Japan and US. College of Humanities and Sciences, Nihon University. 161-171. Retrieved March 31st, 2012, from <http://www.chs.nihon-u.ac.jp>