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Fighting weight



Photo by Hannah Wever

Through schools and programs, families can learn to lead a healthy lifestyle through good nutrition and physical activity. At Unionville Elementary School, Cheyanne Moore peers through the window at one of the vegetable gardens kindergarteners helped plant.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control, increased risk for very grown-up sounding diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma and joint disease are associated with youngsters who are overweight or obese. And CDC data indicates the prevalence of overweight in children and adolescents is on the rise, doubling in 20 years among children aged six to 11, and tripling among adolescents aged 12 to 19. Martha Thorn, Smart Choice Nutrition Education Program Assistant at the Virginia Cooperative Extension Orange office said the best way to prevent overweight in children is through a whole-family approach to

learning about healthy nutrition and lifestyles. And sometimes, she said, that's not easy.

Thorn said most parents aren't consciously choosing high-calorie, low-nutrient meals. But the convenience of a fast food drive-through can be hard to pass up when stomachs are rumbling when the sun is already beginning to set and bedtime's approaching after a long day of work and school. Add to that a dollar menu and a shiny plastic toy, and who wouldn't opt for a quick (cheap) dinner with no cooking and no dishes? A number of programs exist through schools, community groups and the Extension Office to help children-and perhaps more importantly, their parents-learn to make educated decisions about food and activity.

Through the Virginia Cooperative Extension, a program called Madison-Orange Action for Healthy Kids (MOAHK) partners with volunteers, community agencies and schools to make learning about a healthy lifestyle fun for area youngsters.

For a kid, it's pretty good entertainment to toss around a five-pound glob of simulated fat with their buddies, or create (simulated) culinary masterpieces from boxes of rubber (also simulated) hash browns and eggs or chicken and broccoli.

Thorn said those toy-like molded rubber "foods" are irresistible to kids, who can't seem to keep from picking the "peas" apart or pretending to eat "potatoes." Thorn said, amid the giggles and grins, she actually manages to get valuable information across like what's missing from a lunchtime plate of "food" or what a balanced, portioned meal looks like. Through these kinds of lessons, learning proper portion sizes or precisely how many servings of fruits and vegetables are ideal in a day (five, by the way) is pretty painless.

Children and teens, through MOAHK activities, give traditional recipes a "make-over," using smaller amounts of fat, sugar and salt, substituting whole grains for refined ones, and adding fruits and vegetables.

Kids can enter the Orange County Fair's recipe make-over contest. Even without a blue ribbon at the fair, participants have acquired fundamental healthy eating habits and nutrition basics.

Helping children maintain a healthy weight and develop healthy habits for eating and physical activity doesn't have to be a chore, or expensive, Thorn said.

"You can't break habits," she said. "You just replace them."

The Family Nutrition Program, also implemented through the Virginia Cooperative Extension, helps families learn ways to maintain a healthy lifestyle, even when access to affordable nutrition may seem out of reach.

Much of the curriculum is centered around learning which are healthy foods and household strategies for nutritious meal planning. Family Nutrition Program staffers and volunteers work with clients-many of whom are employed but still struggling financially-to learn self-sufficiency through one-on-one or group sessions. Program participants explore topics like meal planning, nutrition, shopping and cooking.

Access to those aspects of wellness is important to the parent whose grocery budget is limited, or who may feel the family menus can consist of only what can be bought within walking distance because there's no other transportation available.

Sometimes, simply getting to and from a source for healthy eating is an obstacle, Thorn explained. It's difficult to plan for a week's worth of well-balanced meals when what you can buy is limited to how much you can carry, for example. And when you can keep kids' bellies full with a quick meal of macaroni and cheese or sugary cereal, it's hard to picture any other way, until someone shows what the alternatives are and how to turn them into something the family will actually eat.

"When you're working full-time just to keep the lights on, you're tired," Thorn said, so there are times when planning meals from affordable ingredients and maximum nutritive value isn't always the first priority for families.

In some cases, families' attempts at a well-balanced diet are foiled by marketing methods. A label that boasts "Made with whole grain taste" doesn't necessarily mean there's a single whole grain in the product. And a breakfast cereal may claim to be fortified with this or enriched with that, but potentially beneficial additives are offset if there's three days' worth of sugar in a recommended serving, Thorn said.

"Marketing can be pretty deceptive," she said. As a result, Thorn said label-reading ranks up at the top of the list of steps towards creating a healthy family lifestyle. A glance at the ingredients offers far more information than a look at a logo.

Even for children whose weight isn't an issue, what's being consumed during the day has a direct relationship

on behavior, concentration and energy. A day which starts with a junk food breakfast, or with no breakfast won't keep students' attention focused on learning, Thorn said. Without a little fuel in the tank, "brain energy" hits rock bottom and physical energy is even lower.

Kindergarten students at Unionville Elementary School are learning about good nutrition from a long-eared, cotton-tailed friend. Children are growing all the vegetables found in Farmer MacGregor's garden in the timeless classic Peter Rabbit written by Beatrix Potter.

Gardens are maintained by the students with the help of Master Gardener volunteers, and Unionville Elementary School Nurse Joanna Davies said the kindergarten gardeners will celebrate what they've grown by enjoying a big salad on June 1.

"As far as I'm concerned, the whole [project] is a success," Davies said. The victory associated with the Farmer MacGregor project, as Davies sees it, is that youngsters who normally eschew vegetables will eagerly consume something they've nurtured, watered and harvested.

Even better, Davies said, what kindergarteners are learning with their gardening ties into larger nutrition lessons that will help them stay healthy throughout their lives.

"A lot of these kids don't know fresh fruits and vegetables," she said. "Kids will say, 'Oh, fruits good for you!' But really, that's about it."

The key to changing a child's perception of what constitutes a good nutritious food choice starts at home, Davies said.

"What it really boils down to is changing parents' thoughts, and that's really hard to do," she said. "A lot of lunches that are from home are not terribly nutritious. Almost every lunch has chips in it. Chips aren't food. We need to convince [parents] that buying a bag of apples costs the same as buying a bag of chips."

And while school lunches have long been associated with sketchy nutrition-like counting ketchup as a vegetable-Davies said school menus have come a long way. Nowadays, she explained, lunches in the cafeteria consist of whole grains and lower fat options. Additionally, the servings have been scaled back to more a reasonable size.

And without a doubt, watching those fruits and vegetables grow from simple seeds to ripe and lunch-box ready edibles can make that five-a-day a far more appealing prospect.