

Loving their veggies and exercise too

(by Sara Keegan - February 04, 2009)

For parents, nothing is more important than their child's health. But keeping healthy is more than just going for checkups at the doctor, it's living a lifestyle that includes healthy behaviors, such as eating habits and being physically active. The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey and the YMCA have joined in a new initiative in New Jersey schools to make sure kids learn healthy practices at an early age. The program is called Healthy U, the first of its kind in the state to both address and correct childhood obesity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 16.3 percent of children aged 2-19 were considered obese between 2003 and 2006. And the number is growing.

"There's a worldwide rise in childhood obesity," said Maria Considine, nurse at Lincoln School in Rutherford.

Obesity can be determined by measuring Body Mass Index (BMI). According to the CDC, BMI is a measure of weight in relation to height that is used to determine weight status. Overweight includes children with a BMI between the 85th and 95th percentile for their age group. Obesity includes children with a BMI at or above the 95th percentile for their age group. Obesity can lead to a multitude of health problems, ranging from asthma and sleep apnea to diabetes and cardiovascular disease.



At the YMCA Afterschool Program in Rutherford, kids love their veggies. A new program called Healthy U is bringing healthy eating habits and more active lifestyles to the table.

To combat childhood obesity, Horizon and the YMCA are attacking the epidemic on three levels: with a healthy diet, physical activity and family involvement. The program is a four-year initiative aimed at reducing obesity rates in New Jersey children by December 2011, at the end of four years. So far, the Healthy U program has been implemented in 359 YMCA locations, including the Meadowlands YMCA after-school program at Lincoln School.

"We hope to expand the program. We look at this as just the beginning," said Daniel Emmer, manager of public relations for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield. To kick off the program, Horizon awarded a \$1 million grant to the program.

The after-school program at Lincoln School not only provides care by YMCA employees, it also includes healthy snacks and physical activities. The program was well on its way last Thursday, with the Lincoln School gym divided into two parts to accommodate the many children already participating in the program.

"These kids will keep moving for an hour," said Emmer. "They don't even know they're exercising."

The physical aspect of the program involves non-competitive games that focus only on keeping the children active and having fun. On this day the fun involved bean bag races and Hula Hoop games, but the children have their favorites.

"I like when we play basketball," said Sky Morales, Healthy U participant.

On the other side, children were enjoying vegetables as a snack, something that didn't always happen.

"In the beginning it was probably a little bit of a struggle," said Amelia J. Griffiths, program director of the Meadowlands YMCA. The process was gradual; the program included two days of regular "treats" before becoming strictly health foods all week long. The kids now line up eagerly for a plate full of broccoli, cauliflower, carrots and peppers.

"They're yummy," confirms Lara Saric.

The Meadowlands YMCA came up with a "grocery list" with the help of Dr. Stacy McClosky, family wellness director.

The family aspect of the program comes in when children go home and share what they have learned at the Healthy U program. Parents are encouraged to get involved by continuing these healthy habits at home.

"We would only encourage parents to keep their children as active as possible," added Emmers.

The Healthy U program was heavily influenced by the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) program developed by the University of Texas School of Public Health, which also focuses on the three areas to fighting childhood obesity. The CATCH program was developed with 15 years of research and the University of Texas School of Public Health will be involved in evaluating the Healthy U program at its conclusion.

The program in Lincoln School kicked off Sept. 16, 2008 and is aimed towards students in grades K-8. So far, it appears to be a success.

By participating in the Healthy U program, children are learning healthy habits they can continue to practice as they grow up. According to the CDC, children and teens who are obese have a greater chance at remaining obese as they enter adulthood. The program aims to reduce risks of and eliminate obesity to promote the health of New Jersey children.

"[The program] has the opportunity to make a tremendous difference in the health of children," said Emmers