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Anti-obesity efforts showing results among the very young

Patti Singer
Staff writer

Popeye would love eating at the Head Start centers in Rochester. Surprisingly, so do the 3- to 5-year-olds who dig into spinach.

"They wouldn't eat it at home," said Deborah Ajewole, health services manager for the Action for a Better Community Head Start Program.

The kids go for other nutritious foods they might not like or even see at their dinner tables.

"We get feedback from parents who said their children love broccoli," Ajewole said. "They say, 'Why don't you do this? We have this at Head Start.'"

Healthful eating is part of the ABC 1+2+3 program at five ABC Head Start centers in Rochester. The effort is a slice of a communitywide initiative to reverse the trend of childhood obesity.

Early results from the Head Start program show that the rate of obesity has not increased, which considering the barriers to nutritious food and active play that many families face, is being seen as a victory.

"Changing the obesity epidemic is like moving the Titanic," said Kathryn Reeners, ABC 1+2+3 coordinator. "It's not something that will happen overnight. You get it to start turning by holding the numbers steady, which we've done."

The need for interventions crystallized in January 2009. Dr. Stephen Cook, assistant professor of pediatrics at Golisano Children's Hospital, conducted the first study to determine the rate of obesity for a representative sample of 2- to 18-year-olds in Monroe County.

The data showed that 15 percent of children in the county were obese but that 22 percent of city children were obese. The study was funded by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation, which is making a 10-year financial commitment to fighting childhood obesity.

Nationally, data from 2007-08 showed that 17 percent of children were obese, a figure that had been holding steady for a few years.

Locally, the GRHF and the Healthi Kids Coalition of the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency are looking to combat the issue on several levels — addressing nutrition and physical activity in schools and day care centers, development of safe play areas and support of breast-feeding.

Starting early is seen as the key. Cook said that teens who are obese face a near-certain future as obese adults, but 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds who are obese have a 55 percent to 60 percent of being obese as adults.

To try to change habits for children — and their families — the GRHF is funding staggered three-year initiatives at day care centers run by the Children's Institute, ABC Head Start and the YMCA of Greater Rochester.

The Children's Institute program, a collaborative funded by the GRHF to focus on nutrition and movement in child-care settings, started in 2007. Improvements were evident after the first year, according to Cook.

Data on 547 children, whose average age was 4, showed that the rate of obesity decreased from 13 percent to 12 percent and the rate of overweight dropped from 12 percent to 11 percent. Children also took 1 percent more steps, measured by pedometers, while in care.

ABC 1+2+3 began in September 2008 and features one hour of exercise, two servings of fruits and three servings of vegetables.

It includes the national Head Start curriculum I Am Moving, I Am Learning, which increases the amount of physical activity in the classroom and teaches children how to make healthy choices.

"For little kids, the food that they are served and the activities that are part of their day are purchased and planned by adults," said Bonnie DeVinney, vice president and chief program officer of the GRHF. "To change adult behavior will take a long time."

DeVinney said that children have tremendous influence over their parents. She uses recycling as an example. "They started recycling in school classrooms, and kids went home and said, 'Where's our blue box?'"

She also acknowledged that parents of small children face many pressures. Focus groups told policy planners that chastising parents over food choices isn't helpful.

While the ABC 1+2+3 program is devoted to teaching children healthy habits, it also offers cooking and exercise classes to parents and staff.

Reeners said that the adults are catching on. For instance, attendance at an aerobics class doubled from the first to second session.

"We've seen a big change in attitude and acceptance that this is a problem," Reeners said.

She predicts that more substantive results will follow.

"Once lifestyle changes become more accepted, people will live overall a healthier life. People will see a resulting decrease in weight."

PSINGER@DemocratandChronicle.com
