

Promoting healthy habits for young children

Looking for some delicious and fun ways to eat healthy and exercise? Ask the three- to five-year-olds participating in the Eat Well/Play Hard curriculum as part of the Greater Rochester Healthy Child Care 2010 initiative.

A unique collaborative between Children's Institute and local children's organizations, the goal of this groundbreaking initiative is to help prevent weight and obesity problems in young children through education. Children's Institute will be evaluating the effectiveness of two programs used in family child care programs and in child care centers.

According to research cited in a 2004 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 23% of U. S. children two to five years old are already dealing with, or are at risk for, these issues. In addition, overweight children are at risk for other physical and mental health conditions.

Sarah Mutch, a registered dietician with the Child Care Council, one of the collaborating partners, provides weekly on-site training at participating child care centers in Monroe County. Among her bag of tricks are recipes and activities to help improve nutrition and physical activity policies at each center.

At Generations Child Care in Gates, NY, director Mary McDowell said that the curriculum created a buzz. "Every week Sarah had a healthy turn on a snack or yogurt, like fruit kabobs. One mother brought in organic fruit for us to use because her husband works on a farm," she explained. "The kids also looked forward to her visits because she was so upbeat and energetic."

One mother, Debbie Porter of Churchville, describes her 15-month-old son Stephen as not a great vegetable eater. "Sarah's recipes gave me more options for sneaking in vegetables, such as cheese quesadillas with broccoli, chicken and tomatoes...a modified grilled cheese," she said. "He seems to like it."



In addition to tasty treats, Mutch would integrate reading and physical activity into her visits. McDowell, whose background is in recreation, appreciates that the physical component of the program is creative. "Sarah's activities with the children went beyond traditional playground activities and sports," she said. "It helped us all have some 'aha!' moments."

Staff in-service and parent education are also part of the program, which is funded by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. For example, Mutch offered recipes that parents can try at home and information sheets for the children to take home about what they did in school today.

"I'm fortunate to have healthy children in my center because their parents make a lot of efforts to do a good job at home," McDowell added, "but Sarah opened our eyes to foods we wouldn't normally think of as child-friendly, like black beans. Our parents were very receptive to it."

In Porter's case, Stephen is really too young to make choices about what he eats. "I'm making the choice to give him vegetables and fruit with every meal—introducing fresh versus

processed," she added. "It's hit or miss. There are days when he'll eat all of his green beans or peas, and then other days they'll all end up on the floor."

To encourage the centers to continue with the initiative after her visits come to an end, Mutch supplies a supplemental notebook with recipes and activities, along with the equipment needed, such as measuring spoons, cups and a scale to measure the children's weight and height.

After such a positive experience at the preschool level, McDowell wants to incorporate the same principles into her school-age program as well. "It is a cool and simple program that's easy to implement," she added. "Each week we pick a program out of the book and my staff runs with it. It's so clearly written that they don't even have to do any additional research to make it happen."

"I recommend it highly," McDowell said.

Even having easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables because her in-laws own an organic farm in Elba, NY, Porter finds it a challenge to come up with new ideas to foster her son's good eating habits. "I know I'm not the only one either. In the grocery store, other moms are always eyeing what I'm buying and asking what my son will eat," she said. "There's not a lot of information out there, so Eat Well/Play Hard is a great resource to have. If they had a hotline, I'd use it."

In addition to Children's Institute, collaborating partners for the Greater Rochester Healthy Child Care 2010 initiative include the Child Care Council, Golisano Children's Hospital at Strong and Rochester Childfirst Network. The project is funded by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation.

This news appeared in the Democrat & Chronicle in April 2008, the Rochester Association for the Education of Young Children (RAEYC) newsletter and on RNEWS in June 2008.