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Getting healthy with 'Stuffee'

Doll teaches kids to eat and exercise right

by Teresa C. Brown

April 02, 2004

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Kindergarten students at Walnut Grove Elementary School sat quietly, anxious to meet their special 7-foot-tall, blue-haired visitor. "Stuffee," an oversized stuffed doll, is both a tool and ambassador for the pilot program Healthy Starts for Healthy Hearts that was launched at the school earlier this month.

Siah Fried, a health educator who developed the Healthy Starts program, brings Stuffee to classes as a fun and interactive way for children to learn about making healthy eating choices.

"All I want are small changes and awareness," Fried said. Obesity is an issue that the program addresses through education. She hopes that, through the program, children will take an interest in making healthy lifestyle choices, such as food and activity level.

Fried developed the program as a thesis for her master's degree in public health, and she tailored the program for specific age groups. With the kindergarten class, Stuffee becomes a fun learning tool. Children are excited to see the jumbo doll with a zippered stomach, with stuffed pillow-like internal organs. Fried pulls out the pillows from Stuffee's stomach to discuss the functions of organs, such as the heart, lungs and intestines.

Fried begins the three-session program with a parent night. "I basically show (parents) the curriculum outline, so they can support it at home." She also demonstrates with comparisons: how a bag of frozen ravioli, lettuce, loaf of cost the same - \$15 - as a fast-food meal for four.

In class, she uses Stuffee to capture the attention of her pint-sized audience. The length of the small intestine was met with glee, as children stood in line holding the rope-like pillow.

During the second session, with Stuffee again by her side, Fried discusses nutrition, relying on fun activities to help the kids learn about choices. "We'll make a healthy meal on a paper plate and an unhealthy meal, using pictures pasted to the plate," she explained.

She also encourages students to keep a food diary with parents. "We don't pay attention," she said of food choices, adding that people may not realize how often they eat unhealthy foods.

The program ends with a session focusing on getting the children to be more active. "It's not just what we're eating," she said.

Fried explained that it is too easy for children to sit in front of the television. If children watch the television, play on the computer or with video games for two hours, they should be active for at least an equal amount of time, she said.

"There are things you can do with your kids," she said, encouraging parents to play imaginary games that can be as simple as pretending to chop wood, running through cones or sailing a ship.

While Stuffee catches the attention of the kindergartners and raises awareness, the responsibility for healthy lifestyles is at home. "Bringing fruits and vegetables (for a snack) is just as easy as Lucky Charms," Fried said.

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