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## Students learn to navigate fridge

York Region duo's manual teaches balanced eating to young junk-food junkies

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No one can accuse Kevin Murdoch of not practising what he preaches.

A surprise inspection of his family's refrigerator produces a bunch of fresh carrots, cartons of skim milk and fruit juice, a container of low-fat frozen yogurt, but very little junk food.



Staff Photo/Bill Roberts

For a house with teenagers on the premises, there seems to be a shocking lack of potato chips.

Steve Coons (left) and Kevin Murdoch are co-authors of an interactive nutrition manual for elementary school students.

"You certainly might find some in this house, but you'll also find a variety of other stuff, too," he said. "It's all about having choices and everything in moderation."

The Newmarket investment advisor says he first became interested in childhood nutrition about five years ago, when he grew concerned about the eating choices of his own two pre-teen children.

Then, his son, who was in Grade 6 at the time, had to memorize the Canada Food Guide for school.

"Well, he memorized it, took his test and then forgot about it," Mr. Murdoch said.

The problem, he figured, wasn't that children are disinterested in the material; it's that the material isn't presented in a way that really engages students.

So, together with Steve Coons, a personal trainer, he thought about ways in which they could make learning about nutrition a little more fun.

The result: the Lifestyle Journey program, which combines fictional stories about nutrition, eating guides, posters and checklists, all designed to give young people a more interactive learning experience.

"For a lot of publications already out there, you go into a bookstore and you'll find a lot of books are geared toward weight loss and dieting," Mr. Coons explained.

"Although that's a significant problem for a lot of families, it's not something we wanted to focus on as much. This (book) puts the kids in control, by letting them make decisions."

Despite the fact the two do not make their living as teachers or textbook writers, their program is starting to attract the interest of educators.

Thanks to corporate sponsorship, their program will be introduced to students in several Alberta junior high schools in the fall as part of a pilot project.

Meanwhile, the York Region District School Board is also set to introduce the program to students in one Newmarket school when they return in September. If it works out there, it could be adopted by schools across the board and, perhaps, the province.

"We thought it was a great program," said Heather Sears, health and fitness curriculum consultant with the board.

"It's certainly consistent with our board's priorities with respect to integrating literacy and it's another way of having the important issues of healthy eating addressed."

The two men have also just been invited to share their thoughts at an upcoming conference for the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association, a group that represents health and physical education professionals in the province.

It's little wonder their program is attracting interest.

The sad fact is, figures show Canadian children are getting fatter.

A recent study by the Canadian Medical Association found, between 1981 and 1996, the prevalence of obesity more than doubled in both boys and girls.

Another study by the Canadian Council on Social Development found 25 per cent of Canadian children are considered overweight and more than two-thirds are not active enough for proper growth and development.

Only one in five children and teens are getting the minimum recommended servings of fruits and vegetables per day, with 51 per cent of children and teens getting less than one serving a day.

Other studies have found an increase in arteriosclerosis, a condition that leads to heart disease, in children as young as five, solely because of their eating habits and lack of exercise.

Fast-food restaurants and the increasing popularity of prepackaged, processed food share a lot of the blame for these rising numbers, but Mr. Coons stresses it's not entirely fair to just blame the "bad" foods.

"One of the things we try to stress in the program is there has to be a balanced approach," he said.

"We're not suggesting kids don't eat junk food or things that are marginally nutritious. You can still go out and enjoy all those things. What we want to do is give people ideas that may be quick and easy, but that are also healthy."

While they wait for the pilot schools to report back with results, the two are also hard at work -- "somewhere between the front and back burners", Mr. Murdoch jokes -- on another program focusing on teaching personal finance.

"They're not taught that in school and that's a function of the budget restraints," he said.

Right now, though, healthy diets come before healthy wallets and they are hopeful their grassroots efforts will soon bear fruit.

"We're not saying (to kids) you can't have that, but that maybe you need to rethink your balance," Mr. Coons said.

"You need to realize, too, that the choices you're making as a young person right now will influence not only your health right now, but also your future health as an adult."

To learn more about the Lifestyle Journey for Schools, visit [www.ideasforpeople.com](http://www.ideasforpeople.com)