

Concerned about childhood obesity, two fathers develop positive program for kids

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(CP) - It began at a fitness centre in Newmarket, Ont., where fathers Steve Coons and Kevin Murdoch, working out on the cardio machines, got into a serious conversation about the childhood obesity epidemic.

That was the genesis of their Lifestyle Journey Program, a classroom resource aimed at helping Grade 7 and 8 students and their parents make healthier choices.

In the last 20 years, the number of obese children in Canada has tripled and the number of overweight children has more than doubled.

"One of the things we were trying to do from the outset of the program was to put the tools in the children's hands," says Murdoch, a financial advisor.

Adds Coons, a kinesiologist: "With so many dual-income families out there and with added pressures to make healthy decisions for their children we wanted to develop a program that parents could give their children so that they could learn to make healthy choices for themselves."

Both he and Murdoch say the obesity crisis is the result of fast food (much of it in large portions), increased use of computers and video games and cutbacks to school sports and recreation programs.

The guide, meant for children aged nine to 15, uses a fictional story to discuss important issues such as heart attacks, cancer, smoking, peer pressure, body image and the impact of advertising.

It also includes a parent guide that provides tips on how to teach healthy habits to children and a quick reference poster for the refrigerator to help kids make good food choices.

Last fall, the program was introduced to 85 Alberta schools as well as 20 others in northeast British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Wyoming. This followed a seven-month pilot project among 1,000 junior high school students in six Alberta schools sponsored by gas company EnCana Corp., in partnership with Coons's and Murdochs' company Ideas for People Inc.

"Based on the pilot we saw an increase in physical activity and we got feedback from the kids on how they were changing their eating habits as well - it was really positive," says Murdoch.

Carsyn Cain, a student at Strathmore's Crowther Memorial Junior High in Strathmore, Alta., said she liked that the program allowed her to make her own choices.

"Kids like to have freedom and if you have the freedom to make your own choices, you'll probably go for the right one."

She also became a fan of healthier foods. "I find that healthy foods taste almost better than junk food."

Dietitian Kristyn Hall of the Calgary Health Region acknowledged the challenge facing young teens.

"Food is everywhere in our environment," she says. "We are always being reminded, 'maybe I'm hungry,' because it is in our vending machines, in our gas stations and other places where it never used to be."

For more information, contact ideasforpeople@sympatico.ca.

Some facts about childhood obesity in Canada:

- In the past 20 years, the number of obese children in Canada has tripled and the number of overweight children has more than doubled.
- One out of every seven children between the ages of seven and 13 is obese (16.6 per cent of boys and 14.6 per cent of girls).
- Some common problems related to being overweight or obese include poor self-esteem, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, high blood fat and cholesterol and some types of cancer.

Source: Calgary Health Region.



Carsyn Cain, a student at Crowther Memorial junior high in Strathmore, Alta., says the best part of her Lifestyle Journey program was being able to make her own choices.

(CP PHOTO/Jeff McIntosh).