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Kids get the skinny on eating healthier

Program gives tips on Starting Right

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ELICEO FLORES never imagined that fruit could taste so sweet until he watched nutritionist Sandra Arevalo whirl bananas and pineapples in a blender and sampled the frothy drink she poured for him.

"I learned that drinks don't have to have added sugar in order to be good," said the 15-year-old Bronx resident.

He and his mother, Maribel Flores, had come to the South Bronx Health Center for Children and Families for a routine doctor's visit.

In the waiting room, they attended a cooking demonstration — followed by a tasting — and came away feeling empowered to eat healthier food.

The nutrition lessons are offered as part of the Starting Right program funded by the Children's Health Fund and the Picower Foundation.

With childhood obesity at an all-time high, Starting Right is aimed at overweight kids as well as kids who are at risk for becoming overweight or obese.

"Kids are screened at their routine checkups, and any child who is overweight or obese is referred to a nutritionist and to this program," said Sandra Goldsmith, co-director of Starting Right.

The South Bronx has one of the highest obesity rates in the city. At this health center, which is a program of the Children's Health Fund and Montefiore Medical Center, more than half the children are overweight or obese, Goldsmith said.

Besides one-on-one nutrition counseling, eligible kids ages 10 to 14 also attend cooking demonstrations, get nutrition information and participate in physical exercise.

Some 50 families have completed the program.

"Some parents are resistant to the idea that their kids have a weight issue," Arevalo says. "We have found that the most effective way to help families is to have workshops for the parents and children together."

For Elvira Degante, the program was a godsend because it motivated her son, Antonio Resinos, 11, to enroll in the 14-week program to shed weight.

"I eat more salads," Antonio said. "And for breakfast, I eat healthier cereals that don't have sugar in them."

The nutritionists advise keeping costs down by sticking to fruit that's in season. They also don't prepare dishes that require pricey kitchen equipment.

"Our families have blenders at home, so it's easy for them to make smoothies," Arevalo says.

Besides cooking demonstrations, participants attend fun programs such as a supermarket scavenger hunt to look for a snack that has a certain amount of fiber in it, or a focus on what healthful items can be found in a fast-food restaurant.

"We tell kids how to read a label to figure out how much sugar is in a food, and how it's healthy to mix juice with water," Goldsmith said.

"They're small tips, but they can make a big change."

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