



Starting right and staying healthy

By Edward Small
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Dion Williams, Health Coordinator of Forest Houses' elementary after-school program, was in trouble. He'd just walked into the Forest Houses Community Center with a late-afternoon snack and instantly found himself at the center of a chorus of disapproval. The reason? His meal. It had been deemed unhealthy.

"I've got corn!" Williams protested. "Corn and tofu. I've got string beans. String beans are healthy!"

At least it was progress. Williams' accusers were the children enrolled in Starting Right, a pediatric obesity-prevention and treatment program run at Forest Houses in collaboration with The South Bronx

Health Center For Children and Families, a program of The Children's Health Fund and The Children's Hospital of Montefiore.

The goal: to get the 6- to 12-year-old participants, who live in the borough with the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in New York City, to learn better nutrition and fitness habits.

Children spend the first 15 minutes of every class learning how to make a healthy snack, such as fruit smoothies, with their instructors. This is followed by a 45-minute lesson on health related subjects such as food groups. The children spend the second hour exercising in the Forest Houses gymnasium.

"It's hard to get them to pay attention," said program associate Ari Mishkin. "But when they do, I feel like they love it."

"They have such short attention spans," echoed Anthony Bennett, who helps run the children's time in the gym. "You've always got to keep them busy."

This challenge was on full display during the discussion about exercise in the October 18 class. Although most children were eagerly offering up examples of different kinds of physical activity, one was much more interested in playing with a toy car he had sneaked into the room.

Morrisania, where Forest Houses is located, is one of the city's unhealthier regions. According to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's 2006 Community Profile for Morrisania and Highbridge, a bordering neighborhood, 27 percent of adults are obese, 16 percent of adults have diabetes, and 54 percent of adults report not exercising at all. These are all higher than the overall New York City statistics of, respectively, 20 percent, 9 percent, and 43 percent.

The statistics for childhood obesity in the South Bronx are closer to the overall numbers for New York City. According to a May 2007 report from the Bronx District Public Health Office, 31 percent of children enrolled in Head Start in the south Bronx are obese, compared to 27 percent in New York City. In both the South Bronx and New York City, 24 percent of children in public elementary schools are obese.

Figures like these are why Sandra Arévalo, co-director of Starting Right, believes it is important to start health education at a young age.

“When they’re adults, it’s harder to change their eating habits,” she said. “The earlier you start, the better it is.”

When Arévalo launched Starting Right in the South Bronx six years ago, she used to run classes with just four children. Since then, the program has expanded greatly. It now serves two groups of approximately 15 children per week.

“People referred each other,” she said, explaining Starting Right’s rise in popularity. “It was word of mouth, really.”

Arévalo has seen some positive changes during her six years working in the Bronx. Specifically, she has noticed that people today are more aware of what they need to do to stay healthy. The next step, she said, is making sure people have the skills to act on this awareness. They need to learn how to read nutrition labels, purchase and cook healthy foods, and exercise effectively.

“People don’t know how easy exercise is,” she said. “They think they have to join a gym.”

Skills like these are exactly what Starting Right aims to teach its participants. In doing so, the program hopes to help them avoid problems like obesity and diabetes, which Arévalo believes is the biggest health issue in the south Bronx.

Forest resident Maria Rivera, whose 7-year-old son Joshua Garcia is enrolled in Starting Right, was very appreciative of the program. She is normally uneasy about letting Garcia play outside due to concerns about violence and drugs in the neighborhood, so Starting Right represents one of his few chances to get some exercise.

“When he gets home, he’s just going to watch TV, but when he comes here, he’ll be more active,” she said. “He’ll be able to go out and have some fun.”

Joshua himself is also a fan of the program. He said that it helps him “get healthy and active” and added that his favorite activity is “jumping rope.”

Despite having been accosted by its participants, Williams approves of Starting Right as well.

“I love this nutrition program,” he said. “When you can get the kids active and doing what they like to do, that’s always a win.”

Jordan Jenkins, a 9-year-old participant in Starting Right, offered a blunter assessment.

“We make stuff,” he said. “It’s fun.”