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Opinion

OUR VIEW: Poverty, ignorance barriers to healthy eating

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Earlier this month, a coalition of city leaders, educators, health care providers and community organizers worked together with the New Britain Early Childhood Collaborative on a “blueprint” that focused on how to improve the lives of city children from birth and age 8.

Among their concerns is the increase in the number of overweight toddlers.

“For preschoolers not in Head Start, 22 percent are obese and 34 percent either obese or overweight,” said Merrill Gay, executive director of the collaborative.

He put some of the blame on the accessibility of sweets and, in particular, the choice of soda and juices over water. He suggested that immigrants, who may come from a part of the world where drinking water has to be boiled and filtered, may be leery of what comes out of the tap.

He also suggests that parents read food labels to determine nutritional content.

At the core of it, then, is a need to educate not just the toddler but the entire family about healthy eating. One of the challenges the collaborative will face is reaching out to these families in an effective way, especially if a language barrier exists.

And, as he has said, this effort may mean changing perceptions brought from the homeland.

But just knowing the facts isn’t enough. Often the cheapest choices are the worst, as evidenced by the number of high-fat items on fast-food dollar menus while a salad can cost four times as much.

A third issue is that fewer families actually cook from scratch any more. As harried mothers, who work outside the home, try to put dinner on the table quickly, they turn to processed foods which are often loaded with sugar and sodium. While some manufacturers are listening to nutritionists and reducing the amount of these additives, moms would still do better to use raw ingredients — but that takes time they may not have.

With all of these lifestyle issues in play, the collaborative has some real challenges ahead of it.

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