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News

Childhood obesity battle starts with switch to water

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NEW BRITAIN — Identifying the problems facing New Britain children is fairly easy. Figuring out how to solve them is not.

Earlier this month, a coalition of city leaders, educators, healthcare 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 between birth and age eight.

The policy initiative focused on five areas:

n reducing the number of low-birthweight babies and overweight 3- and 4-year-olds.

n increasing the number of mothers with a high-school diploma, children ready for kindergarten, and children reading at grade level.

The blueprint proposed to fix the problem of overweight toddlers by expanding “efforts to prevent childhood obesity” and “identify childhood obesity early and begin interventions right away.”

Easier proposed than implemented. And it’s not just New Britain toddlers having problems with their weight; Americans overall have become considerably larger in the last two generations.

“My daughter came home with the Woodstock movie on DVD,” said Merrill Gay, executive director of the New Britain Early Childhood Collaborative. “I was amazed by how everyone in the movie was thin.”

Gay mentioned a pediatrician friend who “talks about how, in his years of practicing, his sense of what’s normal has changed. He sees so many overweight or obese kids he’s become desensitized. He has to look at the [weight] chart to determine if the child’s weight is normal.”

The accessibility of sweets is an evolutionary issue.

“If you think in terms of evolutionary time, it’s only been a blink of an eye since mankind looked around for stuff to eat. ... We’ve only lived in established communities for 8,000 years. Think of how much more energy went to putting food on the table in our grandparents’ generation than ours,” he said.

Despite living in an advanced technological society, we still have the bodies of cavemen. We’re hard-wired to crave fat and sugar — substances rare in a hunter-gatherer diet, but very easy to get in modern times.

“Solving the problem will take heightened attention to appropriate amounts of food. Exercise is important, but a lot of people need to reduce their caloric intake.”

Soda, for instance.

“When I was a kid, soda was something special you had at a party; you didn’t have it every day. Get the soda out of the house. Kids’ll be happy with ice water,” he said.

Gay said convincing city parents of this might be a challenge.

“We have a high immigrant population in New Britain, people who come from places where you can’t drink water from the tap. I grew up in Africa — my dad was in the state department — and I remember boiling and filtering water before drinking it.”

But such measures are not necessary in New Britain.

“New Britain water is good ... at the collaborative, we call ice water ‘earth juice.’ When parents asked, ‘Where’s the juice?’ they said their kids wouldn’t drink ‘earth juice,’ but the kids thought the cold water tasted good.”

Gay suggests that taking away soda and juice’s default-drink status would be a good start.

“Reducing sugar and juice intake is the easiest, cheapest thing to do. Reading food labels is important; understand that food you make yourself is almost always better than food from packaging. Boxed macaroni and cheese is cheap and easy, but not very good for you,” he said.

Gay is compiling height and weight measurements for city children.

“For preschoolers not in Head Start, 22 percent are obese and 34 percent either obese or overweight,” he said.

Overweight is defined as in the top 85th percentile for weight, and obese in the top 95th percentile. “I expect the numbers for Head Start to be higher, since those children come from poorer families.”

— Lisa Backus contributed to this report

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