

'Color My Pyramid' nutrition education program battles obesity in DC schools

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An online game might be the secret weapon for winning the war against childhood obesity. Researchers at George Mason University have designed and tested a nutrition education program called "Color My Pyramid" to teach students how to evaluate their dietary intake and activity level. The program incorporates the Department of Agriculture's MyPyramid.gov for Kids Blast-Off Game, an interactive computer game that allows kids to win by fueling their rocket with nutritious foods and a healthy level of physical activity.

The Color My Pyramid program comprises six classes taught over a period of three months. Researcher analysis showed that the program significantly improved children's eating habits, increased physical activity levels, lowered blood pressure and decreased weight and Body Mass Index percentiles.

"With 35 to 40 percent of children's daily calorie consumption occurring during the school day, it is quite appropriate that a comprehensive nutrition intervention in school would assess, prevent and reduce the number of overweight and obese children," says Lisa Pawloski, associate professor and chair of the Department of Global and Community Health in the College of Health and Human Services and co-designer of the program. "We hope that this pilot study provides a clearer understanding of effective approaches to nutrition interventions for school age children."

More than half of the participants, ages 9 to 11, were in the overweight

or obese categories, a finding that although alarming, is consistent with the current trends of children from lower-income families living in urban areas.

"Washington, D.C., has one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the country and it is unfortunately leading to serious problems of chronic diseases at a young age," says Pawloski. "As a researcher, it was very eye opening to see the number of local children affected by this epidemic. It was also different from other research projects because we both designed the education program and tested its effectiveness."

The epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States is growing. Results from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2003-04 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey indicate that 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 years are overweight, putting them at increased risk for diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer. However, Pawloski—who led the study along with Jean Burley Moore, professor and assistant dean of nursing research development in the College of Health and Human Services—feels confident that childhood obesity can be overcome through education and parental involvement.

"One of the major issues underlying obesity is selecting the right foods," Pawloski says. "By educating children about making healthy eating choices and educating parents and teachers on how to encourage those behaviors, children may have better success in sustaining a healthy weight."

Source: George Mason University

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