

## **Preschool plan targets good health**

February 20, 2008 - Stamford Advocate

NORWALK - The preschoolers in Room 12 at the Ben Franklin Center were having a ball on a recent morning.

In the center of the room, a dozen 3- to 5-year-olds jumped and sang "Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes" while their classmates prepared a classroom snack of strawberry and banana waffles.

Strawberries, grapes, broccoli and green peppers recently became more appealing to the preschoolers.

Since September, the youngsters, their parents and teachers have been participating in the Healthy Active Positive Playful Kids program sponsored by the Norwalk Health Department.

Called HAPPY Kids, the program introduces children to the importance of nutrition using national health guidelines that recommend five daily servings of fruits and vegetables and encourage walking, dancing and taking part in other activities.

The kids do daily exercises and once a month make their own healthy snack, such as carrots and raisins or yogurt parfait.

Teachers say it's working.

Illene Gebuza said she's seeing more vegetables disappear off lunch trays.

"The food activities are hands-on so they're becoming more familiar. They love broccoli and celery," Gebuza said.

The program is funded by a \$10,000 grant from the General Mills Foundation Champions for Healthy Kids program to combat childhood obesity.

Donna Svendsen, associate director of the General Mills Community Action Foundation, said there were more than 1,000 applicants last year.

"It's very competitive process and this is one program that rose to the top," Svendsen said.

Norwalk Health Department was one of 50 nonprofit organizations that got a grant.

According to a 2006 report by the Future of Children, nearly one in every four preschoolers is overweight. The public policy organization reported that there are 21 million preschoolers in the United States and 13 million of them spend a good part of their day in a child-care center. That's why programs such as HAPPY Kids are critical, said Gabrielle Grode, who works for the Norwalk Health Department.

A survey of the center's 158 preschoolers found that about 20 percent were overweight, Grode said.

The center on Flax Hill Road is part of the NEON Head Start, a federal childhood development program for low-income families. The center provides breakfast, lunch and snacks.

Federal guidelines require the health department to monitor the children's weight early, Grode said.

"A lot of kids were struggling with the issue," Grode said.

The children will have their body mass index measured again in June. Teachers are keeping tabs on fruit and vegetable consumption and preference, Grode said.

HAPPY Kids draws from the "Captain Five A Day" nutrition program provided by the state Department of Public Health. Captain Five A Day is a nutritional superhero who sings the "Mango Twist" and other songs. Teachers receive bilingual activity sheets, nutritional handouts and recipes for parents that include fruit fizz, which replaces high-calorie sodas with fruit juice and seltzer.

Teachers receive a \$15 gift card each month to buy groceries for the healthy snack for the children prepare. They also used grant money to buy cooking appliances and utensils.

School nutritionist Deborah Herskowitz said getting preschoolers to embrace spinach and bell peppers isn't easy

"You need to train their taste buds," Herskowitz said.

By making their own nutritious meals, preschoolers are motivated to taste new things, Herskowitz said.

"That's the best way to learn," she said.

Director Patricia Kierecki said learning goes beyond eating healthy. Kids are measuring ingredients, counting fruits, and naming colors and shapes of food.

They're also learning to work together, she said.

"This is the time in children's lives to influence their future. They're learning social skills and eating habits that will probably stay with them forever," Kierecki said.

Teachers are feeling inspired. Diane Haygood, who's taught there for 11 years, said she's spiced up her vegetable dishes, adding asparagus, spinach and red peppers.

"There were a lot of things I was not buying that I'm buying now," Haygood said.