

## Empowering children to lead healthy lives

March 18, 2013 – Over the past nine years, Virginia Cooperative Extension has pioneered a research-based program that has motivated 30,000 Virginia children to lead healthier lives through good nutrition, physical activity, and bodyimage awareness.



The Virginia 4-H Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids Program launched its Eat Smart, Move More initiative in 2011 to help children throughout Virginia develop healthy eating habits and increase their activity levels. Virginia Cooperative Extension distributed 65,000 posters to schools and community based 4-H clubs, and the same message has appeared on billboards and buses in major metropolitan areas throughout the state.

Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids reassures children that there is no perfect body size and teaches them that a body weight that fosters growth, learning, development, fitness, and well-being is a healthy one.

The program is having tangible results. The children, ages 7 to 14, who participated in the program reported improvements in their eating habits and activity levels.

Survey results showed that:

- 94 percent exercised more

- 84 percent chose more nutritious snacks
- 80 percent ate more vegetables
- 74 percent drank more milk and less soda.

"These positive behaviors break the vicious cycle of weight gain, poor grades, inactivity, and low self-esteem," said Elena Serrano, an Extension nutrition specialist who developed the program.

Research shows that school-aged children with healthy diets and vigorous physical activity have higher grades. They are also less likely to suffer from high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, and sleep disorders, according to Serrano, who is also an associate professor of human nutrition, foods and exercise in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Extension takes the Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids program to schools, camps, 4-H clubs, and parks and recreation centers. The agents rely on a variety of resources to deliver science-based messages that emphasize proper portions of fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, and dairy products.

"We expose children to new foods so when they go to the grocery store with their moms, they will ask for a yogurt fruit crunch instead of grabbing frozen pizza rolls," said Mary McFerren, project director for Extension's Family Nutrition Program. FNP helps low-income families and children eat healthier on a budget, make smarter food purchases, and prepare meals at home.

For Doris Perkins, a single mom from Richmond, Va., and an FNP participant, the days of eating fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy are gone. She now prepares baked chicken served with a side of spinach and mushroom salad for her family.

"We now add more vegetables and fruits to our meals and we exercise more," Perkins said. "I know how to treat my body, and I have a lot more energy. I'm setting an example for my kids."

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