

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

Hunger Signals: Stoplight image and close guidance help families lead overweight children to healthy eating

Wednesday, July 05, 2006

By Anita Srikameswaran, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



V.W.H. Campbell, Post-Gazette

Veronica Murray of Penn Hills stands in the background as she and her 7-year-old quadruplets listen to Judy Dodd, Giant Eagle food and nutrition adviser, talk about apples in the Waterworks Giant Eagle. From left, her children are Benjamin, Garrison, Jarrell and Nathan. The family is part of a program to help children reach and maintain a healthy weight.

Veronica Murray, a Penn Hills mother of 7-year-old quadruplet boys, did not know that each big, glossy apple or softball-sized orange she'd select at the grocery store counted for more than one serving.



V.W.H. Campbell, Post-Gazette

At the Waterworks Giant Eagle, Judy Dodd, left, gives some food and nutrition advice to mom

She did not know that loose leaf lettuce is healthier and more economical than bagged salad, or that superskim milk is fat-free like skim but has the richer mouthfeel of the 2 percent variety.

But thanks to a program called HEALTH for Families, Ms. Murray, 46, learned to scrutinize ingredient lists and nutrition labels, heard about healthy portion sizes and got information to help her make better choices for her family while she toured the Waterworks Giant Eagle with a store nutritionist.

"We're going through the store and she's pointing all these things out to me," Ms. Murray marvelled. "I was like, 'If I'd only known!'"

She discovered the program, which includes home visits and telephone consultations as well as grocery shopping guidance, while looking for help for her son, Garrison, who is overweight.

The HEALTH for Families project came out of a unique, public-private collaboration of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, the University of Pittsburgh and UPMC Health Plan.

Funded by the Heinz Endowments, it's intended to help parents better the eating and activity habits of their overweight children, explained psychologist Patricia Cluss, director of prevention and health outcomes for UPMC Health Plan, who is leading the project with her Pitt colleague, Lin Ewing.

Except for very obese children, "the goal isn't necessarily weight loss," she said. "It's maintaining their current weight while they grow taller."

Families are eligible for the program if they are a member of UPMC For You, which is the Medicaid product of UPMC Health Plan, and if they have an overweight child between the ages of 4 and 10, Dr. Cluss said.

The nutrition component of the project is based on the Stoplight Diet, which was developed in the 1970s by psychologist Leonard Epstein, now at the University of Buffalo, while he was at Pitt, she said.

Any child who has played a few rounds of "Red Light, Green Light" will get how it works. It has nothing to do with the color of the food, Dr. Cluss cautioned.

Green, for low-calorie, high-nutrition foods such as most vegetables, means go ahead and eat them daily. Yellow, for medium-calorie, good-nutrition foods such as pasta and bread, means be careful about portion size, but you can eat them daily. Red, for high-calorie,

Veronica Murray of Penn Hills, who has four 7-year-olds.

Click photo for larger image.

Related coverage

■ [The Stoplight Plan](#)

More information

To learn more about the HEALTH for Families program, call 412-647-4001 or 1-800-807-0751.

low-nutrition foods such as candy, means stop and think, because you should only eat them now and then.

"All the foods that a kid or a family can think about eating are in one of those three categories," Dr. Cluss said. The Stoplight Diet "has been tested many, many times over the years."

So far, 20 families have completed the HEALTH for Families program, and researchers would like to test it in another 20. If it goes well, it could be expanded into a larger initiative.

Parents have been asked to turn in weekly grocery store receipts, in exchange for \$5 store gift certificates, so that researchers can evaluate how well the intervention worked, Dr. Cluss said.

The researchers also developed easy-to-follow support materials to explain the program, including a laminated pocket shopping guide and a binder of foods listed with serving size and calorie information.

Ms. Murray particularly likes the poster of red, green and yellow foods that fits on the freezer door of her refrigerator. Her sons read it before they search for a snack, she said.

Garrison and Jarrell Murray-Sinicki are both 4 feet, 7 inches tall, but Garrison weighs about 35 pounds more. He has lost about 5 pounds in the program, his mother said. Like their brother Jarrell, Nathan and Benjamin are healthy weights for their heights.

Ms. Murray feeds all the boys the same food, and Garrison loves vegetables, she said.

But "I don't offer anyone seconds," she noted. "They have to ask me for extra food."

She's careful about what the family eats because she has had problems with her weight since childhood. Two years ago, she had gastric bypass surgery and is now 210 pounds lighter, she said.

"I did not want my son to go through such a drastic measure," Ms. Murray said. "It's all about him changing the way he eats and making healthier choices."



V.W.H. Campbell, Post-Gazette

Nathan eagerly raises his hand to answer Ms. Dodd's question.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)