

Healthy Living in Motion

Obesity carries many known health risks, from high blood pressure and arthritis, to diabetes and heart disease. Being an overweight young person can be even tougher, bringing the added burdens of bullying, anxiety and isolation.

In response, the "Let's Go!" program of the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at Maine Medical Center in Portland has made big strides — literally — in changing those children's futures.

"Every third patient I saw had weight issues," recalls pediatrician and program director Victoria Rogers, M.D. Now in its eighth year and third year of statewide implementation, Let's Go! is a nationally recognized childhood obesity prevention program committed to developing healthful eating and active living habits among area children from birth to age 18. Funded by health systems, hospitals, foundations and businesses, initiatives are ongoing in child care centers, schools, workplaces and community settings, in addition to physicians' offices. Let's Go! began within 12 provider practices and now encompasses 170, addressing 80 percent of the state's children, Rogers says.

"The uniqueness of Maine is that we are a physically large state, but really a small city in many ways," says Maine Medical Center President and CEO Richard Petersen. "Collaboration might seem challenging, but it's just who we are and what we do."

Ten evidenced-based tenets form the program's core, with the first five "priority strategies" having the greatest impact on healthful eating and active living for children and teens: providing healthful choices for snacks and celebrations, and limiting unhealthful choices; eliminating sugary beverages in exchange for low-fat milk and water; providing non-food rewards; providing opportunities for physical activity every day; and limiting recreational screen time.

The program's signature initiative is its "5-2-1-0" message, which encourages children to have five or more fruits and vegetables each day, two hours or less of recreational screen time, one hour or more of physical activity and zero sugary drinks.

The message has had an additional unforeseen benefit, Rogers says. "Providers told us the '5-2-1-0' message gave them a safety blanket to talk to young patients, because weight is such a charged



Photo courtesy of Let's Go!

issue. The mnemonic changed the conversation from being about weight to being about healthful behaviors — and it translated easily to the schools."

Rogers developed "5-2-1-0 Goes to School" to build on local schools' pre-existing health education efforts. "The program really resonated," Rogers says. "It linked the physician's office to the school, and developed a connection that I had never seen before." As an example, students at one school planted a vegetable garden to learn how to grow their own healthful food, and during the summer break, neighboring physicians made sure the garden was watered.

Rogers says she got physicians on board with Let's Go! by explaining that they didn't have to "own" obesity, only put up a 5-2-1-0 poster in their offices, check body-mass index and use a questionnaire to guide a family discussion about healthful behaviors. However, Petersen gives her more credit.

"Tory is the energy behind the program — and she's very hard to say no to," he says with a laugh. He adds, however, that "having such a great physician champion makes collaboration that much easier." ●

GROWING UP

HEALTHY: Students take care of their classroom garden where they grow, harvest and eat a variety of vegetables including peas, peppers and tomatoes.