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For Better Living
Tips for Helping Children Maintain a Healthy Weight

Obesity in kids is now considered an epidemic in the United States. The number of children who are overweight has doubled in the last 20 to 30 years. Currently, one in six children is overweight, defined as being at or above the 95th percentile of their age-sex specific growth chart. The obesity rates have increased in both children and adolescents and in all age, race and gender groups.

Bladen County's rates of childhood overweight are no different than the nation. In 2005, 16.3% of the youth in Bladen County, ages 2 - 18, were considered overweight with another 14.5% at-risk of becoming overweight.

The many causes of overweight in children include genetics and metabolism, environment and behavior. Overweight children are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes and to become overweight adults, putting them a greater risk for heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke. Sleep apnea (interrupted breathing while sleeping) can also be a serious problem for the overweight child.

Parents are the most important role models for children. By providing healthy food choices and encouraging active lifestyles, you can encourage the development of new family behaviors. A child will mimic a role model's behavior.

Following are suggestions on what parents can do to help children maintain healthy habits.

Maintain weight. Unless the child is severely overweight, weight loss is not recommended. Severe restriction of calories could compromise growth, delay the onset of maturity and even enhance emotional overeating. If a child is able to maintain weight while height increases, the percentage of body fat will decrease without compromising lean body mass and growth. Yearly medical assessments are suggested to monitor child overweight. Medical experts can detect overweight health problems, provide treatment options and offer nutrition support.

Eat healthfully. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines provide these tips for healthful eating:

- * Monitor portion sizes.
- * Learn to modify recipes with more fruits and vegetables, healthy oils and spices. Reduce saturated and trans fats, sugars and refined grains.
- * Base meals and snacks on nutrient-dense foods - foods that provide substantial amounts of vitamins and minerals and fewer calories.
- * Wait a few minutes before giving additional servings. A break allows for you and your child to determine if hunger is the issue.
- * Don't use food as a reward or punishment, and don't impose expectations about what or how much your child should eat.

Encourage physical activity. The average child watches 4.5 hours of television or videos a day. Watching TV requires no energy above resting metabolic rates and reduces the time a child spends on physical activities. Encouraging physical activity in children helps them understand the relationships between weight, disease and mental well-being. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommend that children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. Physical activity doesn't have to be drudgery. Here are some ways to help create an active environment:

- * Make time for the entire family to participate in regular physical activities that everyone enjoys. Try going on a nature hike, walking around the neighborhood, swimming, bicycling or rollerblading.
- * Start an active neighborhood program. Join together with other families for group activities like touch football, volleyball, tag or hide-and-seek.
- * Assign household duties to every family member such as vacuuming, washing the car or mowing the lawn. Rotate the schedule to avoid boredom from the routine.
- * Enroll your child in a structured activity that he or she enjoys, such as tennis, gymnastics or martial arts.
- * Finally, limit the amount of television and video games allowed per day.

Source: Colorado Cooperative Extension

Creamy Mandarin Cooler

3/4 cup fat-free milk
1/4 cup orange juice
1 can (11 ounces) reduced-sugar mandarin oranges, undrained
1 carton (6 ounces) fat-free reduced-sugar orange creme yogurt
1 package (1 ounce) sugar-free instant vanilla pudding mix
12 - 15 ice cubes

In a blender, combine the milk, orange juice, oranges, yogurt, pudding mix and ice cubes. Cover and process for 20 seconds or until smooth. Stir if necessary. Pour into chilled glasses. Serve immediately. Yield: 5 servings