

Child obesity concern has Calgary program expanded to four countries

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Written by Judy Creighton, THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Chef Will Kwong prepares a healthy meal as he teaches a group of school children in Calgary. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO

A program developed in Calgary schools in 2001 to help children develop long-term nutritional knowledge is now being used in four countries.

Kids in the Kitchen was the brainchild of the Calgary Junior League to focus on childhood obesity and developing healthier lifestyles, says its president Susan Cruess.

The Canadian Federation of Junior Leagues is an organization of women committed to promoting volunteerism, developing the potential of women and improving communities through effective action and leadership of trained volunteers.

"When the program began eight years ago in Calgary it was called Junior Chefs. It was created to also learn food preparation and kitchen safety," says Cruess.

"Many of the children were coming home as latch-key kids with younger siblings and they were taught to prepare some things that would be healthy and nutritious as opposed to something they might pick up on the way home."

She says that as the childhood obesity issue came more and more to the forefront - "and there had been so much success with the Calgary initiative" - it was decided by the Association of Junior Leagues International to expand it to cover the four countries it operates in, including Canada, the U.S., Mexico and the United Kingdom.

Like most projects it starts, the Junior League gets it up and running and then passes it on to another community partner. For example, Junior Chefs in Calgary was passed on to the Boys and Girls Club in that city.

"Up until that point over 2,100 children participated in the program," says Cruess.

The Canadian Federation of Junior Leagues launches its campaign against childhood obesity this month and in April. This year's program continues to teach youngsters about healthy living by involving them in the preparation of their own healthy meals. It also promotes physical activities that will keep their bodies strong and healthy.

The numerous community programs rolling out in 2009 take a grassroots approach with kitchen days at elementary schools where chefs and nutritionists show children how to prepare healthy snacks, round-table talks on reading package labels and portion sizes.

"We use hockey pucks to demonstrate what size a bagel should be and a baseball to depict an orange," Cruess says with a laugh. "The real focus is to have them actively involved."

Kids in the Kitchen responds to the staggering statistic that childhood obesity rates in Canada have tripled since 1981, says Deborah Maw of Toronto, CFJL co-ordinator.

Those children are at increased risk of contracting Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and numerous other ailments related to obesity, including esteem issues.

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On the Net:

Canadian Federation of Junior Leagues, www.cfjl.org.