

Getting fitter at day care

Centers join an effort to help children get more exercise and eat healthful food

Details

For more information on the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care program, visit www.napsacc.org.

By Joe Miller, Staff Writer

It may have been the easiest cold call in history.

Two weeks ago, a personal trainer called Creative Kidz Academy in North Raleigh to pitch a 12-week training program aimed at small fry. Instead of a day-care worker frazzled by trying to keep up with energetic ankle biters, he found a surprisingly receptive ear.

"We get marketing calls every day," says Christy Lowery, owner of the center, people wanting to sell everything from snack foods to playground equipment. "If he had called a year ago, we wouldn't even have considered it."

What's happened in the past year is that Creative Kidz has gotten some health and fitness religion, thanks to a program developed by the UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention that aims to instill healthy habits in kids as early as possible.

The program is called NAP SACC -- the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care -- and it's aimed not so much at the kids themselves, but at the folks many of them spend most of their time with: day-care providers.

"We work with them to help them better understand nutritional planning, physical activity, those kinds of things," says Pam Dowdy, executive director of Wake County Smart Start, which administers the program locally. About 30 of the county's nearly 270 day-care centers are taking part in the five-year-old program, which is also being offered in nine other North Carolina counties.

In the case of Creative Kidz, it was a cold call a year earlier that first got them thinking healthy. And again, it was another serendipitously receptive ear that made things happen.

"I'd been going through some health issues at home when Krista called," says Lowery. "So I was willing to give it a try."

Krista is Krista Barbour, a counselor with Smart Start focused on the NAP SACC program. The Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation had awarded a \$240,000 grant for the program, targeted at three-star day-care centers, and she was trolling for interested centers.

Barbour had Lowery and her staff fill out a self-assessment addressing 14 areas ranging from what the center served for lunch to what the kids did for exercise when it rained. From that, Barbour made an action plan for the center.

"These are the big key areas we can work on first," she says, "in the first six months or so."

"We started making changes immediately," says Allyson Heath, the center's director.

Among them:

- Replacing whole milk with 1 percent. "A lot of people don't realize that after age 2, children don't need whole milk," says Penny Faulkner with Wake County Human Services.
- Swapping fresh fruit for the sugary canned variety. "We used to get one case of fresh fruit a week," says Lowery, "now we get five or six." And the kids are learning to eat such "exotic" fruits as plums and kiwis.
- More water, less juice. "We used to just have the water fountain," says Lowery, and apple juice on demand. Water is now available in the rooms and juice is offered once a day. Notes Faulkner: "Four ounces of juice a day is the recommendation."
- Swapping fried foods -- such as fish sticks or chicken nuggets -- with grilled or baked items. The former have been eliminated entirely, says Lowery, and they've even gotten the kids to eat baked fish (though, she notes, "They think it's chicken").
- Rotating menus. "We used to have four basic menus," Lowery says. Now, it may be a couple of weeks or more before a menu repeats, adding variety for the kids.
- Cookies for snacks have been replaced by more healthful alternatives, such as apple slices dipped in yogurt
- The Blue Cross Blue Shield grant received by Creative Kidz included \$1,500 for playground and exercise equipment. Barbour encouraged the center to look for outdoor equipment that could be broken down and moved indoors on a rainy day.
- "They're like puzzle pieces," Lowery explains as she quickly breaks down a ground-hugging balance-beam contraption called The Wave.
- The center has also added more balls and creative-type play toys, such as parachutes, which can keep little minds and bodies occupied for a good while.
- Lowery says it's not just the 110 kids at the center who have benefited from NAP SACC.
- "You've heard of the college 15?" she says, referring to the 15 pounds commonly gained by entering freshmen. "Well, there's also the day-care 15."
- Lowery says her staff of 24 is now more active with the kids during play time, that they've embraced the water-is-good concept ("Everyone used to show up with sweet tea from McDonald's," Lowery says), and they even held their own "Biggest Loser" contest, with the winner dropping 20 pounds in two months and picking up \$120.
- The more healthful approach has permeated other aspects of the center as well. Every year, the kids participate in a fundraiser for a local charity. Before, it has been your

typical cookie dough/wrapping paper sale. This year they held a bike race that raised \$700 for cystic fibrosis.

- "It was our largest fundraiser ever," Lowery says.
- One component of the NAP SACC program that hasn't been as successful: getting parents onboard.
- "That's been the hardest part," Lowery says. "We still have parents who bring their kids in the morning with sausage biscuits and hash browns."
- Otherwise, she says the transformation has gone well.
- Lowery says eating more healthfully hasn't cost the center much more -- "I think the biggest change is we've seen the milk bill go up \$40 a week" -- and the changes have been "surprisingly painless" to implement. It was mostly a matter of knowing what to do, she says.
- "I think we were in terrible shape before," Lowery admits. "We've done a complete 180

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