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Break grip of obesity, youngsters are urged

Campaign won't be a quick one, experts say, but locally and nationally, the fight is winning allies among children and parents.

By ERIC ADLER
The Kansas City Star

Only 8 years old, and Makayla Williams of Kansas City, Kan., is already a designated target in an escalating war on childhood obesity.

"I think I do weigh a *little* too much," Makalya said this week, her voice coy and shy, as she sat at a round 132 pounds in Children's Mercy Hospital. She was there for a program to help her and her parents shed pounds and live healthier lives.

"I was like, 'Please, just don't let her have diabetes,' " said Makalya's worried father, J.D. Williams who, at 5-foot-8 and 270 pounds, already suffers the disease. His daughter shows early signs.

On Tuesday, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation struck a blow in this war with the biggest financial commitment in the history of the organization: \$500 million to fight child obesity in schools across America.

As anyone with eyes knows, America's kids are fatter. Figures differ, but experts believe as many as 25 million American children — weaned in a Big Gulp-Big Mac-Supersized- Fast Food-Video Game-culture — are now considered overweight. Half of those are considered obese. In Kansas City, the number of overweight children is estimated at 150,000. As a result, cases of juvenile diabetes are also up.

The Johnson Foundation has allies.

In September, the Wichita-based Kansas Health Foundation launched its own \$2.7 million "change something" campaign — spreading its message across television, radio, magazines, even on labels of bottled water and on grocery carts. In cities such as New York, trans-fats have become as unwelcome as rats. Even Hollywood has gotten into the act.

In late April, for example, Nickelodeon is scheduled to expand its kids-centered "Let's Just Play Go Healthy Challenge" program to a full half-hour.

Earlier this year DreamWorks and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services made the ogre Shrek and his buddies spokescharacters for its "Small Step" program. The campaign urges kids to "Get up and be a player," by playing at least one hour each day. (<http://www.healthierus.gov/video.html>)

But winning a war on obesity may be as difficult as those waged on tobacco and drugs.

"It's about changing habits, changing behaviors, changing parents, schools, policies, moving an entire culture," said Georges Benjamin, a physician and executive director of the American Public Health Association. "This may take generations."

Health officials believe culture can and does change.

Children were thinner 50 years ago, but they were also much more likely to grow up to smoke, litter, drive without seat belts and have unprotected sex.

"Smoking is, by far, the best example. It's well under half of what it used to be," said Robert Hornik, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Public Health. "Condom use has gone way up. Seat belts: That has been a cultural change."

Numbers bear it out.

In 1965, 52 percent of men and 34 percent of women smoked. Today, it's 23 and 19 percent.

The percentage of high school teens who've tried cigarettes dropped from 70 percent in 1991 to 54 percent in 2005.

Seat-belt use has risen from 58 percent in 1994 to 81 percent.

High school students who report having had sex dropped from 54 percent in 1991 to less than 47 percent.

Condom use is up — from 47 percent among sexually active teens in 1991 to 62 percent in 2005, the most recent statistical year.

All of these battles were fought on multiple fronts.

It wasn't the media alone urging drivers to "Buckle Up For Safety" that increased seat-belt use. Nor was it the emotional 1970s "Crying Indian" ad that cut down on littering.

It was a combination of what experts call messages "in the air" along with new laws, policies, programs and industry changes enacted "on the ground."

People for decades were being told to quit smoking.

"But it was really the public policy that made the difference, when we started raising the tax on tobacco, not allowing smoking at work, not allowing smokers to harm nonsmokers in public places, when you couldn't sell to minors without losing your license," said Rex Archer, director of the Kansas City Health Department.

When the environment became an issue, a movement was already in blossom. Corporate polluters were under fire. Politicians passed, and police enforced, new laws requiring heavy fines against random littering.

Although \$500 million sounds like a lot of money, James Marks, the vice president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, concedes it's just a start.

Currently the foundation has its sights trained on supporting programs nationwide similar to those being used in Arkansas public schools.

"Schools are where the kids are," Marks said.

In 2003, Arkansas passed a law to combat childhood obesity. When the act was passed, 38 percent of the state's children were deemed obese, one of the nation's highest rates. Three years later it's still 38 percent.

"We have halted it. Now we are working to turn it around," said Debra Pate, spokesman for the nonprofit Arkansas Center for Health Improvement. The group is run by the state's surgeon general, Joe Thompson.

"I can list 15 things we have done over the last four years," Thompson said.

Among just some of the measures: more physical education in all schools; more-healthy foods in the cafeteria; a ban on soft drinks and vending machines in elementary schools.

Arkansas requires all public school students to have their weight checked and body-mass index calculated. Results are sent to parents.

"What we ended up with is one of the most comprehensive programs in the country, if not *the* most comprehensive," Pate said.

The Johnson Foundation's Marks said that much of the \$500 million will support similar programs nationwide or help community or neighborhood groups create them.

But what the money will not do is create the kind of infrastructure or businesses that experts agree are needed to make a real change, such as safe parks, gymnasiums, decent sidewalks or grocery stores in distressed neighborhoods.

Some public health experts said that, in time, America may also need to be transformed psychologically. Smoking indoors today is less tolerated than it once was. People who don't snap their children into car seats are seen as bad parents. Will society judge parents who feed their children junk food the same way?

If the problem of obesity continues to grow, what else may happen? Warning labels on food? Nutritional labels as large as the name of the product? Higher taxes on junk food? A ban on fast food ads?

"We did that with the tobacco industry," Archer of the Kansas City Health Department said. "We limited the access to tobacco to kids. I think we could do that with junk food."

Even with the best of intentions, change is hard. As part of Children's Mercy's PHIT (Promoting Health in Tweens) program for kids, Makalya Williams' involvement involves more than eating right and exercise. Each week kids and their parents meet with a medical doctor, a nutritionist, a psychologist, a social worker.

They work to make nutritional changes at home. They talk about bullying, depression and self-esteem. They guide Makalya to make better food choices at school. Makalya and her parents keep diaries of what they eat, how much they exercise, how much time they spend with the computer or television.

"We're just big TV people" J.D. Williams, the dad, says. "I have 436 DVDs."

"I think it's going to take years and years," Valorie Thomas, a nurse practitioner and educator in the PHIT program, said of the war on childhood obesity. "We're trying to change the culture."

When Makayla weighed in before class Thursday night, the scale read 60.1 kilograms, down 0.2 kilograms or about half a pound from the week before.

It was a start.

On the Web

Go to KansasCity.com to learn more about the "Small Step" program from DreamWorks and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Also find the formula for determining whether your child is overweight.

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On the rise

In the last 30 years the rate of obesity has:

- Doubled for pre-school children aged 2 to 5 years.
- Tripled for children aged 6 to 11 years.
- Doubled for adolescents and teens aged 12 to 19 years.

Source: Institute of Medicine

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