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Puppet Shows Help Hispanic Health Council Promote Proper Nutrition

By KATHLEEN MEGAN | The Hartford Courant

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Maritza Molina, 4, a pre-schooler at the M.D. Fox Elementary School, gets into the act when asked to show her muscles at a puppet show about nutrition presented by the Hispanic Health Council. (STEPHEN DUNN / HARTFORD COURANT / January 13, 2009)

The 4-year-olds' eyes are glued on a spiky-haired puppet in a jeans jumpsuit whose name is Tommy.

Tommy, who watches too much television, is cajoled into going to a basketball practice. When he gets thirsty at practice, he asks, "Is there a soda machine around here?"

"Ahhh, nooo" comes a voice out of nowhere. Turns out it's a talking water bottle puppet — Ms. Water — who has come to warn Tommy about soda.

"Soda makes you thirstier, and it has a lot of sugar that's not good for you," Ms. Water tells Tommy.

Minutes later, Maria Arroyo, the puppeteer, appears from behind the mini-puppet theater and quizzes her rapt audience in Marilyn Viera's pre-kindergarten class at Burr Elementary School in Hartford.

"How many glasses of water should you drink a day?" Arroyo asks.

"Six to eight," comes the answer.

"This boy wants to lie around. ... What's he need to do?" she asks.

"Exercise."

"Should he eat candy a lot?"

"No, fruits and vegetables."

For more than a decade, the Hispanic Health Council, in partnership with the University of Connecticut, has been educating Hartford's young students with an entertaining series of six puppet shows that carry serious messages about nutrition, obesity, exercise, food safety, diabetes and heart disease. Grace Damio, director of the Center for Community Nutrition at the Hispanic Health Council, said it does about 400 puppet shows every year.

And while you might wonder how much a 4-year-old or even an 8-year-old might retain, it's clear at this recent performance that these puppets reach kids.

"I see it every year," said Ginnene Branch, a kindergarten teacher at Kennelly School in Hartford. Before the first couple of puppet shows, many of the children are not interested in the healthful snacks — fruits and vegetables — that she often brings to school for them.

"I don't care how much we tell kids, 'Vegetables are good for you; eat something from each of the food groups.' Kids will say, 'I don't like vegetables.' Some of the kids wouldn't even eat fruit," said Branch.

But after a couple of puppet-show discussions on nutrition and health, she said, "It's like night and day." She'll ask, "Who wants fruit? Everyone wants fruit. Who wants vegetables? Everyone does."

The show is part of a multifaceted effort — with additional programs and materials that reach parents and teenagers as well as small children — designed to address the nutritional and health needs for the Latino community.

A recent study found that 41 percent of a sample of children ages 6 to 11 in the Hartford school system are either obese or at risk of obesity, compared with a national average for that age group of 33.3 percent, according to Dr. Lee Pachter, a pediatric researcher at the [Connecticut Children's Medical Center](#) and a professor at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine.

In Connecticut, 64.6 percent of Latino adults are obese or overweight, compared with 64.5 percent of blacks, and 58.9 percent of whites, according to statistics provided by the Hispanic Health Council.

With the extra weight comes greater risks for diabetes and other diseases. In Connecticut in 2007, 6.7 percent of white adults were told by their doctors that they have diabetes, compared with 15.8 percent of blacks and 8.1 percent of Hispanics.

Why the disparity?

Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, who is director of the Connecticut Hispanic Family Nutrition Program and a professor of nutrition and public health at the University of Connecticut, said the main explanation is lack of access to healthful foods and lack of exercise. "Healthy foods are much more expensive," he said.

In addition, he said, there is a lack of green space in urban low-income areas and a lack of opportunity and money for sports activities. "Latinos and low-income groups are very vulnerable to the marketing of unhealthy foods by the food industry," said Pérez-Escamilla.

Taking Message Home

Pérez-Escamilla said children are "the best ambassadors" when "they go home and share the healthy nutrition messages we give to them. ... They are a part of the movement ... convincing parents of the need to make a change."

Children play a very crucial role, he said, particularly in families where the parents don't speak English very well. These kids often play a more central role in terms of the decision-making about diet and food purchases than do most kids, he said.

Pachter concurred that it is very important to reach children when they are young. "I really feel the future of obesity prevention is going to start younger and younger and younger. I think that the habits that lead to obesity are formulated very early in life."

Back in the classroom at Burr, the kids are telling Arroyo all about their healthy habits. Uriana Ortega says, "I have a cousin who doesn't eat fruit, but I eat a lot of fruit at my grandma's house."

Makayla Esquinlin says she likes broccoli.

Later, Jennifer Fagalar, Uriana's mother, said the 4-year-old definitely carries the healthy-habits messages home. When her mother offers her a treat, she goes for fruit and vegetables, not candy.

Said Fagalar: "She said junk food won't let her grow like she's supposed to".