

Video Game Tackles Childhood Obesity

Oct. 8, 2007

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SPECIAL TO  NEWS

With childhood obesity rates tripling in the last 15 years, Kaiser Permanente has decided to do something about this growing epidemic: It plans to introduce a video game.

This may seem counterintuitive, given that one of the culprits in the rise of childhood obesity is sedentary play, which includes video games and TV.

"Video games are embedded in youth culture and are an effective tool to educate children in an interactive and entertaining way," said Ray Baxter, a senior vice president at Kaiser Permanente, one of the largest U.S. health insurers.

The game, "The Incredible Adventures of the Amazing Food Detective," is currently available free online at www.AmazingFoodDetective.com in both English and Spanish. In it, kids join the Amazing Food Detective to investigate why eight multi-ethnic kids are living unhealthy lives.

As Junior Food Detectives, players snoop into the lifestyles of the unhealthy kids to uncover the causes of their health problems. They will find that all the problems are linked to bad nutrition and activity choices.

For example, when investigating Emily, an overweight girl, they find that she eats good food, but just too much of it. To solve that mystery, players must zap Emily's meals so that each plate contains smaller portions.

The mystery with Catherine is that while she exercises, she isn't very strong. Players help her by dragging more protein onto her plate of food. For example, you can add peanut butter to bread and meatballs to spaghetti.

The other mysteries involve unhealthy kids who skip breakfast, play too many computer and video games, eat too much junk food, get tired too quickly, lack calcium and need more activity.

Each time children solve one of the eight mysteries, they unlock three of the game's 24 arcade mini-games. The mini-games vary greatly, but they are usually themed to the eating or exercise problem brought up in the mystery. For example, the games linked to Emily all involve making healthy food choices. In one, kids will whack candy away as it falls, and, in another, they will place healthy foods on trays that zip by on a conveyor belt.

In addition to the mysteries and the arcade mini-games, the game provides printable materials for kids. They can print out scavenger hunts that teach them how to read food labels, healthy kid-friendly recipes, experiments that show them how to measure the amount of sugar in sodas, physical activity cards and other fun yet helpful items.

"The Incredible Adventures of the Amazing Food Detective" is unique because it has an automatic turnoff 20 minutes into the playing experience. The Amazing Food Detective dramatically interrupts the game to explain that it is time to take a break and get active. She tells children not to return for 60 minutes and while they are gone, she suggests that they do push-ups.

Kaiser Permanente put in this feature to "emphasize the anti-screen message," Baxter said. "We support the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation of no more than one to two hours of 'screen time' per day."

Kaiser Permanente developed the game for 9- and 10-year-olds "because research shows us that if you can positively influence the behavior of children at their age, you can affect their lifelong eating habits," he said.

Experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agree that changing bad habits during childhood is crucial.

"Because obesity that begins in childhood is associated with more severe adult obesity, the effective prevention and treatment of childhood obesity is a critical strategy to control the rise in medical costs," said Dr. William H. Dietz, director of the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity at the CDC.

In addition to being free on the Web, "The Incredible Adventures of the Amazing Food Detective" is being distributed to 5,000 schools with the help of Scholastic, the global children's publishing and education company.

Those schools are also receiving supplementary educational materials for teachers as well as take-home materials for families to explore together. Kaiser Permanente has made all those

supplemental materials available for free as a download at www.AmazingFoodDetective.com.

Rating: 4.5 stars (out of 5)

Best for ages 9-10

From Kaiser Permanente, www.kp.org/amazingfooddetective, available free.

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