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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF BROWARD

Club tries to make healthy eating fun

A volunteer organization set up a cooking club to let students have fun in the kitchen with healthy foods.

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Six-year-old David Baptiste thinks he knows what he likes.

"Oh, please, no, I don't want the coconut, please, no," he said cringing and scooting away from a bowl of ingredients.

Don't tell the North Fork Elementary student that he ate a mouthful of coconut a few minutes later and called it delicious.

Members of the Junior League of Broward helped teach David and about 20 other children how to make granola bars Monday -- with coconut -- as part of a cooking club to familiarize the children with healthy food.

The Association of Junior Leagues International, a volunteer organization, started the Kids in the Kitchen program in 2005 in response to rising rates of obesity among children.

The League's Broward chapter linked up with students from the Salvation Army's after-school program to hold its first eight-session series, which began three weeks ago.

About 12 percent of high school students in Broward County are overweight, according to a 2005 study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The study also said about 77 percent of the students eat less than half the recommended daily amount of fruits and vegetables.

Children aren't taught good eating and exercising habits at home anymore, said Darlene Moppert, the district's program manager for nutrition education training.

Too many busy working parents push fast food on the table and let their children spend the day on the Internet instead of sending them outside for some exercise, she said.

"By the time they're getting to high school there's already a problem," Moppert said. ``It's harder to change their behavior by then."

But nutrition is an abstract concept, tricky for tummy-driven elementary school students to understand.

It's hard for coloring book pictures of the food pyramid to compete with the power of processed sugar. Activities like making granola bars can help associate healthy with happy, said chef Lenore Nolan-Ryan, who volunteered to lead Monday's cooking.

In past sessions, they've had veggie pizza and created sailboats from apples and cheese.

"If they have a positive impression, they're going to want to do it again," said Nolan-Ryan, who runs a cooking school in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea. ``They take it home and ask their parents to do it."

The parents are key, said Heather Moraitis, chairwoman of the Junior League Fitness and Nutrition Committee in Broward.

As guardians of what goes in their children's mouths, parents set up lifelong eating habits.

If a little excitement like the toys in McDonald's Happy Meals lure kids into obsession, a hands-on cooking club can add spark to healthy food.

The kids got a charge out of pouring ingredients with neon green measuring cups, mixing squelching tins of grain and honey and adding a touch of chocolate for the granola bars.

This week, students snacked on unfamiliar granola and cranraisins -- dried cranberries -- from bowls set up for cooking. Last week, they encountered red peppers, many for the first time.

"We had to really cheer them on," Moraitis said. ``Some of this stuff they've never seen, but they're at an age where they'll still try it."

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