

Healthy Kids U

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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One in five children under 18 years old is considered obese, a number that has held steady in recent years.

8% of children are considered severely obese – their Body Mass Index (BMI) is 120% over where it should be for their age and gender. That number has been on the increase, doubling in the span of just a few years.

It's stats like those that convinced [Dr. Amy Christison](#), a pediatrician and board-certified obesity specialist and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria (UICOMP) that *something* needed to be done for children who fell into those categories. She established Healthy Kids U in 2009 through OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois, adding a weight management clinic, where she serves as Medical Director, in 2012.

Healthy Kids U works with community partners in a variety of ways, helping children ages 8 – 15 and their families develop healthier habits.

"In the program that's community-based we would like them to learn about healthy eating, balanced eating, some tips about really trying to promote more healthy fluids rather than going with sugar beverages, trying to get good sleep, trying to get a lot of physical activity and during the physical activity portion trying to get families and children to do activities that make them feel really comfortable about moving and develop that confidence and positivity about staying active," explained Dr. Christison.

Participants in the 10-week program work with a health care professional, dietitian, exercise specialist, and medical students from UICOMP who work to make it fun and informative.

Dr. Christison says theirs is not a *Biggest Loser* approach, which isn't always the best for children. She says they look at this as a marathon rather than a sprint, with a goal of developing healthy behaviors for life.

"What our focus is in clinic and in our program is to really promote new habits as a child and as a family that will continue to keep their body strong and healthy all their lives. And when they focus on that and they start learning these new habits and develop them, and have it a part of their lives, it's amazing how also then their size gets into that healthier range as well."

Family involvement is encouraged in the group sessions, with moms and dads often joining in. 12-year-old Donovan Miller is heading into 7th grade. He took part in Healthy Kids U with his father and 8-year-old brother.

"My favorite thing was the variety of games you got to play and what was going on in the classes - you never knew like what was gonna happen. Sometimes it would just be a normal class but then the next week we would have a full cooking lesson. And one week we created a smoothie - it was so much fun."

"I learned to eat healthier and I learned to be more active and I learned to not sit on the couch and watch TV," said Embry Miller, 8.

"If you just try stuff you don't know what it tastes like because you never tasted it before," added C.J. Arreguin, 9.

C.J. Arreguin was there with his mother, who encouraged him to take the class. He also admitted the zucchini he tried really wasn't that bad! All of the participants look forward to taking the class again.

The medical students say they look forward to their time with the kids and engaging with them each week. Hannah Stein is entering her fourth year and plans to go into family practice. She says there's a tremendous need for this type of program which encourages physical activity, especially when she hears kids admit in clinic they're not giving up their screen time.

The class even has the added benefit of being a stress-reliever for the med students.

"Med school can be really stressful the first two years, it's a lot of time indoors staring at computer, reading a book. But just running one or two hours a week outside, hanging out with kids who really don't care about medicine and just want to talk about life and sports - and really a million other things, it's actually a really big stress reliever for a lot of medical students," said Hannah Stein, UICOMP student.

The next 10-week session will be at the Greater Peoria YMCA starting September 17. Classes run from 6-8 PM and cost just \$20 per family, which includes access to the YMCA's facilities during the duration of the program.

For more information on [Healthy Kids U](#) or to register, call (309) 624-9844.