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'FoodPlay' teaches healthy eating

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The newest tool in fighting childhood obesity in Carroll County is juggling. This week, more than 4,000 elementary students in Carroll and Douglas counties will have watched Janie Junkfood learn about healthy eating and make the junior national juggling team as part of an educational program about healthy eating and exercise.

Students from the county elementary schools will be visiting Tanner Medical Center-Carrollton to watch FoodPlay, which is part of the hospital's nutrition month activities.

Gina Brandenburg, Tanner's community outreach manager, used a grant to fight childhood obesity to bring FoodPlay to West Georgia. Along with shows for students, the group will do a performance today that is open to the public.

Two weeks ago the FoodPlay Troupe - which includes Ashley Beam, who plays Janie, Tom Hodgskin, who plays her coach, and state manager Michelle Baxter - left their headquarters in Massachusetts and have already done several performances in Georgia. The response has been positive, Baxter said.

"You can see as they walk out, they tell Janie and Coach what they're going to eat for lunch," she said. "When they bring up diet soda, kids start to yell out they should drink water instead. You can tell the nutritional aspect in the classroom is really good."

In the program, Janie is preparing, with the help of Coach, to try out for a national juggling team, but her unhealthy diet is holding her back. Instead of breakfast and healthy drinks, Janie eats sugary snacks and drinks soda and sugary sports drinks. After a short burst of jitters, she's too tired to juggle, so Coach teaches her about juggling a healthy diet.

Along with teaching the basics about healthy eating - including the five-a-day rule for fruits and vegetables - the program also shows students how to make healthier choices by looking at nutrition labels. One can of soda, Hodgskin tells the audience, has 10 teaspoons of sugar.

FoodPlay was founded by Barbara Storper, a former journalist and registered dietician, as a fun way to present healthy eating to children.

"She researched all of this. It's all factual," Baxter said.

March is National Nutrition Month, and FoodPlay is one of the ways Brandenburg said the hospital is trying to educate people on healthy living. Along with tonight's performance of FoodPlay, attendees can talk with a registered dietician and see displays on what's really in their food.



"Janie Junkfood" gets tangled in a list of ingredients that come in her sports drink as "Coach" holds the bottle during the FoodPlay production on Monday at Tanner Medical Center in Carrollton. The show is targeted toward children and is centered around teaching them to make good food choices. (Julie Dawes/Times-Georgian)

“We show them how much fat and sugar is in their food,” Brandenburg said. “It hits them visually.”

Tanner is also starting a pilot Healthy Kids Club at Sand Hill Elementary School.

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