

Ohio Healthy Programs: Small changes can make a big difference

In Lorain County, seventy percent of adults are overweight or obese. There is growing concern across our county since being overweight or obese is a risk factor for diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Healthy habits begin in childhood. Building the foundations of healthy behaviors in our youngest community members can help children maintain a healthy weight throughout their lifetime, preventing future disease.

Lorain County Public Health (LCPH) has a team of health education specialists trained to implement Ohio Healthy Programs (OHP). With support from the Ohio Department of Health and Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Association (OCCRRA), OHP can create healthier environments at child care programs that support parents, teachers, staff, and children in making the healthy choice the easy choice.

LCPH partnered with in-home child care providers, Diane's Daycare Learning Center and Raquel's Little Learners to identify policy, system, and environmental changes that could be made to improve the health of children and adults. Together with LCPH, Diane and Raquel identified small changes in the normal day-to-day that could improve the healthy eating habits and access to physical activity for children.

After identifying needs and drafting plans for Raquel and Diane, LCPH worked with them to take the necessary steps to improve health and reach the OHP designation. The first step was to receive OHP training focused on nutrition, physical activity, and healthy policies. Secondly, a variety of menu changes were adopted to ensure that each meal provided children with nutritious foods, including plenty of vegetables, fruits, lean meats, and whole grains. Next, Diane and Raquel developed parent engagement activities to involve whole families in healthy behaviors. Diane hosted a "Wonderful Mom Game Night" where healthy foods were served - including a "Wonder Woman" themed fruit tray. Raquel hosted a family bowling night, and provided an OHP handout, "Cold Weather Fun" with tips to keep active during the winter months.



Wonder Woman themed fruit tray

The final step was to adopt a healthy policy. Raquel chose to adopt a breastfeeding policy and trained her staff in the proper storage of milk. Diane chose to adopt a policy that prohibits highly processed meats from being served at her daycare. "By not offering processed foods I know what is in the foods when I am serving it. Before OHP I would heat up frozen foods and now I prepare fresh foods and told the families that more fresh fruits and vegetables will be offered in my care," Diane shared.

Moving forward, Diane and Raquel plan to maintain their OHP designation, training staff, and continuing to make one policy change each year. They also plan to offer additional family engagement strategies. Not only does the OHP designation get everyone thinking about health, but it shows local families how much their child care providers care about the success of their children, in all aspects of life. Additionally, because OHP trainings are Ohio Approved, child care staff can earn contact hours through OCCRRA too.

OHP is available to any Lorain County early childcare program, both Type A and Type B providers. LCPH can train staff and provide technical assistance, from making a plan to assisting with submitting the OHP designation application and ultimately preventing childhood overweight and obesity.