

Here's to healthy kids



The Healthy Kids Programme aims to promote healthy eating and active living among children.

PROMOTING healthy eating and active living must start from a very young age. Healthy eating habits and active living amongst children are cornerstones to their health and well being. This will, in turn, enable them to excel in their academic activities.

Healthier children are the foundation for a future generation of healthy Malaysians. In cognizance of this, the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) launched the Healthy Kids Programme (HKP) in early August. Being implemented in collaboration with Nestlé (M) Berhad, the HKP is aimed at improving nutrition knowledge and promoting healthy lifestyles among school-going children in Malaysia.

Global Healthy Kids programme

Education is the single most powerful tool for ensuring that children understand the value of nutrition and physical activity through the course of their lives. Recognising this, Nestlé launched Healthy Kids Programme as a global initiative that uses education as a tool to help educate and empower children to lead healthier lifestyles.

The global programme aims to improve nutrition, health and wellness of children through better eating, exercise, and other key health measures such as hygiene. The programme has been running for several years in countries such as Australia, France, Brazil, Russia, Italy and Hungary, and has reached approximately four million children worldwide.

In this region, Thailand launched its Healthy Kids Programme with the Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Education in 2004. More recently, China initiated a Healthy Kids Programme with the Chinese Nutrition Society in May this year.

All programmes are designed in collaboration with the national health authorities, health and nutrition professional bodies, child nutrition experts and educational foundations of the respective countries. Other countries that have implemented the programme include Singapore and the Philippines.

It is now implemented in Malaysia, with similar objectives, although there may be differences in implementation strategies and activities.

Launched in Malaysia

The HKP in Malaysia, with the theme "Let's Be Healthy!", comprises a two-pronged programme that will run concurrently. The first component is a number of awareness promotion activities among primary school children and parents. The



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second component is the development and evaluation of the effectiveness of an educational programme to improve knowledge, attitude, and practices on nutrition and physical activity.

The whole programme is aimed at improving nutrition knowledge and inculcate healthy eating habits among children between the ages of seven to 12 years old. Efforts will also be made to promote active lifestyles among these children. The importance of healthier food choices and hygienic food preparation shall also be highlighted to canteen operators.

HKP is intended to complement the Government's efforts to promote greater awareness and the practice of healthy eating and physical activity among Malaysians. It is hoped that the activities drawn up will be able to make significant contributions to nutrition promotion in the country.

For the awareness promotion component, various approaches and activities have been planned. Visits will be made to several schools to conduct roadshows to impart simple healthy eating messages to schoolchildren in a fun way. During these events, educational materials such as comic books, posters and bookmarks and a guidebook for parents will be distributed.

Another activity that was started for the HKP was a Parent-Child Nutrition workshop. The workshop enabled parents and their child to participate in interactive group discussions with nutrition experts where they shared their concerns and experiences with other parents. The experts were available to provide practical advice and tips.

An important educational tool for HKP is the creation of a dedicated website, www.healthykids.org.my. This educational website offers useful tips, animated articles as well as interactive games and tools for both children and parents.

The second component of the Healthy Kids Programme also includes a research component, which is aimed at developing and determining the effectiveness of

appropriate educational materials to facilitate the teaching of nutrition to primary schoolchildren. It is envisaged that at the end of the project, appropriate educational materials and approaches for teaching nutrition in primary schools can be developed. Planning for this component has commenced and will be implemented in early 2011.

Parent-Child Nutrition workshop

The main objective of the workshop is to enhance the knowledge on food and nutrition of parents and children, with a special emphasis on the importance of a well balanced diet, regular meals, and physical activity. Through discussions in the workshop, it is hoped that experts will find out from parents and children their daily common eating practice and physical activity, and to also hear from parents the issues that they may face in feeding their children.

Hopefully what we discuss today will empower you with the necessary skills and confidence to inculcate healthy eating habits and lifestyles in your children.

Thirty pairs of parents (all of whom were mothers, except for one father) and children participated in this workshop. Participants were divided into three groups, each group with 10 pairs of parents and their children. Nutritionists and a child psychologist facilitated the discussions. Participants were asked to share their thoughts and practices on: taking breakfast, consumption of snacks, lunch and dinner; taking of supplements; and physical activity pattern.

Almost all parents and children spoke freely during the discussions. At the end of the breakout session, a parent representing each group reported the group discussions in a plenary session. Some common pattern or common practices could be observed from the discussions of the three groups, although there were significant differences as well. Some general highlights from the discussions are shared below.

Breakfast practices among this

group of participants were rather good. Most of the parents gave their children breakfast daily. The most common types of foods consumed for breakfast differed considerably. Many consumed milk, bread, egg, oat, cereals, while some had only a glass of milk.

Most of the children do not like to pack food from the home to be consumed during recess. They consider such foods unappealing and not tasty. They purchase a number of fried items and cordial or sweetened drinks from school canteens.

Most parents encourage their children to have physical activity. However, many expressed concern on the safety of their children when playing outside. Common activities include cycling, badminton, swimming, football. Many parents also make an effort to have physical activities with their children a few times a month during weekends.

Many of the parents gave their children vitamin and mineral supplements. A few gave other types of "health" foods. These are mostly self-prescribed, learnt from what they read in magazines and newspapers, from friends and sometimes from doctors.

Valuable lessons were learnt from this workshop, organised by NSM for the first time. These will help us in organising similar workshops in the future. This particular group of participants appear to be rather knowledgeable about the importance of good nutrition. It is perhaps more useful to carry out similar workshops among less knowledgeable subjects.

Nevertheless, the participants found the session most useful. They found it helpful to have some of their knowledge and beliefs reaffirmed by the experts. They also learnt new things and had certain beliefs clarified. For instance, many parents were surprised when told by the experts that it is really unnecessary for their children to be taking daily supplements.

Healthy Kids Programme website

This dedicated website for HKP

has been designed to enable both children and parents to learn together through various interactive tools. The design may be catered more towards children, but there are various useful information for parents as well. Currently only phase 1 of the website has been completed. It has four main sections, namely "My Home", "My School", "Playground" and "Shop Zone".

In the My Home section, parents and children will be able learn the basics on how to practise healthy eating at home. For phase 1, there are two articles for parents to help them plan their children's meals for the week. Future content in phase 2 will include information on importance of breakfast and simple ideas and recipes for both parents and children to prepare healthy breakfast and snacks at home.

Under the section My School, there are two main components. The first component is the animated food pyramid which teaches what should be eaten from each level of the pyramid. It also gives additional information/tips for food items within the levels of the pyramid. After having learnt about the food pyramid, children can play a simple game which will reinforce the main messages regarding the food pyramid.

The second component under My School is the digestive system where children can learn what happens to the food we eat at different parts of the digestive tract. In phase 2, this feature will be animated, where the children will be able see the process of food being digested. Other contents to be included include information on making healthier food choices in school canteens.

In the Playground section, children and parents can learn about simple tips on how to keep an active lifestyle. Visitors can also download a physical activity pyramid and print it out and use it as a poster. In phase 2, it is planned to provide information to children on how to play various games and sports, including various skills and interesting tips.

The last section is Shop Zone. For now, there is an article to educate parents how to shop smarter and healthier for their family. In phase 2, more articles will be uploaded, with topics such as reading nutrition labels and how to shop wisely for fresh foods, packaged products, etc.

NSM welcomes all readers to visit the website and explore it with their children!

■ *NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*