

# Children Should Wear Chefs' Hats in the Kitchen

While youngsters gathered in one room at the Dasher Green Head Start Center in Columbia on July 21 to make white, puffy, chefs' hats, their parents brushed up on nutrition and exercise tips in a nearby room. After 45 minutes in separate groups, the parents and children converged to make and eat an energy mix made from cereals and raisins along with a pasta salad loaded with veggies and whole wheat macaroni.

When handed a giant white spoon to mix the pasta and veggies, one young participant exclaimed, "I can stir it," showing she was hungry for kitchen duty. Another expressed her taste for the newly created concoctions in one word, "Yum."

The 90-minute free program these families attended was titled "Eating Smart, Being Active," and was sponsored by the Community Action Council of Howard County. Open to 2010-11 Head Start children and Judy Center Summer School students, it will run for eight sessions this summer, with families being encouraged to attend all the sessions, but new attendees will be accepted if space is available. Up to 10 families can enroll in each session. The program was made possible by a contribution from Ascend One as well as food donations and free cooking classes by the University of Maryland Extension Service.

"When kids get their hands on food – chop and mix things – they're more likely to try new foods," said Becky Ramsing, a nutrition educator from the University of Maryland Extension Service, who led the parents' meeting as well as the food preparation session. At both gatherings, Ms. Ramsing talked about the importance of exercise as well eating healthy doses of fruits, veggies, and whole grains.

The program's Coordination Assistant Ariel Onitiri led the children's session with assistance from four adult volunteers. At the first session, the women helped children embellish their chefs' hats with decorative designs and stickers, twist brims into head-sized circles and secure them with paper clips, attach white tissue paper with scotch tape, and then plop the finished product on youngsters' heads.

"I'm eager to incorporate whole grains with our meals so my children get a chance to taste it," said Nichole Thomas, who attended the session along with her two daughters. Mrs. Thomas also commented that the program made her aware that children are supposed to be physically active at least 60 minutes every day while adults should exercise a minimum of 30 minutes daily.

To further the pursuit of healthy living, participants were given books with recipes for healthy snacks and meals as well as handouts on the benefits of staying active and tips on cooking with children. The families were also given free grocery gift cards.

In 2010, Head Start presented a summer box lunch and craft program for the first time. This year, Head Start collaborated with the University of Maryland Extension Service, which allowed this summer's revised program to offer the opportunity for children to learn more about nutrition, food preparation, and the importance of exercise, according to Director of Education Linda Behsudi.