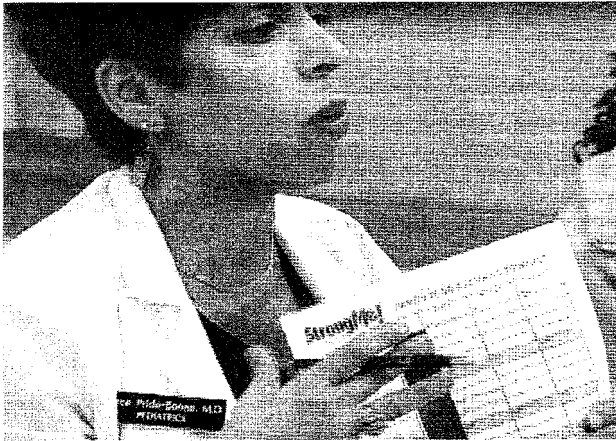
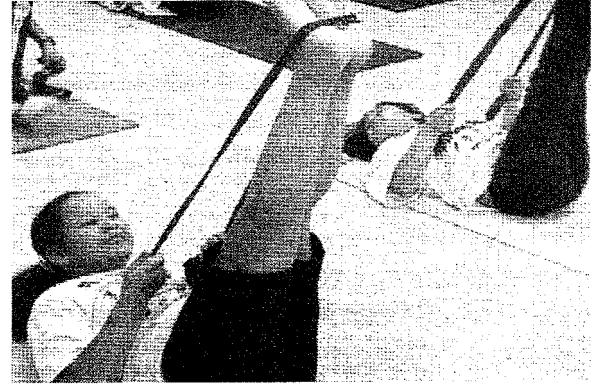


Tackling Obesity in Kids

By Jane Schneider



Pediatrician Janice Pride-Boone, MD, discusses her Strong Me Program.



Children attend a yoga class as part of the Strong Me Program.

Americans are junk food junkies. And our steady diet of fast food and sodas is costing us our health. Nowhere is that reality more evident than in America's children, whose poor eating habits are resulting in an alarming rise in the prevalence of hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, and obesity. It's a reality pediatrician Janice Pride-Boone, MD, sees everyday in her practice, where she specializes in the treatment of childhood obesity.

"I find families in the Mid-South eat too much meat. And for breakfast, they're still eating eggs, bacon, and butter, but too few whole grains. So it's too much saturated fats - and bacon! Entirely too much bacon," said Pride-Boone.

Determined to tackle obesity, Pride-Boone developed Strong Me, a grant funded program aimed at helping families change their eating and exercise habits.

Ask the Brooklyn native her thoughts on why children today are struggling with weight and she quickly points to a commonly found ingredient in processed foods: high fructose corn syrup. The sweetener is used in goodies kids (and their parents) crave: corn chips, sodas, crackers, cereal, cookies, candy, colas, the list is endless. In addition to serving up empty calories that the body converts into fat, the sugar also plays tricks with the mind. Research by Harvard Medical School professor and pediatrician David Ludwig, MD, provides good evidence that "too much sugar turns off the leptin hormone that tells us to stop eating," said Pride-Boone. In other words, the brain doesn't get the signal that the stomach is full, which can lead to overeating.

What's more, parents don't always connect childhood illness to weight. Betsy Friedman, project manager for Strong Me, faced that dilemma with her own tween-aged daughter two years ago.

"She was pre-diabetic. She was in the 85 percentile for growth but she was sick - a lot. I had to learn that the foods I was feeding her were making her sick," said Friedman. What Friedman soon discovered is precisely what Pride-Boone preaches to her parents; eating fresh foods every day and getting plenty of exercise is the simplest way to lose weight and stay healthy.

The 12-week program uses exercise, nutrition, spirituality, and behavior modification to wean families off of sodas and processed foods and onto a healthier diet of fresh fruits, vegetables, water, milk, and exercise. During each class session, families hear from nutritionists about how processed food

robs their bodies of nutrition and why raising the heart rate makes for a stronger cardio-vascular system. They do yoga and exercise as a group. And at the end of the two-hour meeting, they enjoy a meal together. Most participants lose weight during the three month program, but Pride-Boone has also learned the importance of sustainable change.

"We wean them off junk food and teach them cooking and healthy ways to eat but then they can't sustain it because there are no supermarkets to get healthy foods," said Pride-Boone.

For families living in inner city neighborhoods, getting to a supermarket can be difficult if not impossible without a car. "They have few options because of transportation costs. They need a cab or bus to get to the market and since there are fewer . markets (nearby), they become more reliant on the corner store."

Pride-Boone points to a recent session she had with children in the Binghamton neighborhood through Caritas Village community center. While the children liked the fruits and vegetables they were served as part of the program, all that existed in their immediate neighborhood was a Sonic and a corner market. That's why she is currently working with Josephine Williams, coordinator of Grow Memphis, a community gardening program, in hopes of landing grant money to grow gardens that poor families can access. She also plans to tap from her many community partners.

It was during her work as a pediatrician in New Orleans that Pride-Boone says she began to sense her calling. "I kept seeing the same kids every month, coming back with hypertension and sleep apnea, joint pain, and asthma. One 14-year-old even needed to have her gall bladder removed." All of their complaints were associated with obesity. "I took off my stethoscope and realized that I had to get in with the family to cook and shop and look at how to change their habits," she said.

Using the 12-step model, Pride-Boone is a firm believer in the spiritual aspect of the program too, encourages participants to lean on their faith in their quest to embrace new habits. Mostly, she wants kids to be kids again: healthy, fit, and in the game.

To learn more about her program, go to www.strongme.org, or call (888) 495-6555.