

Health officials collaborate for food, fitness, fun program

Eight-week effort aims to teach local children healthy habits

By Ryan Blessing
Staff Writer

KINGSTON — Hands-on food and meal preparation, games to teach nutrition and plenty of activities like yoga and jumping rope are part of a family-based program starting this week to foster healthy habits in children.

Rhode Island Food, Fitness and Fun, designed for kids

ages 6 to 11, is launching a new eight-week session for families in and around Wakefield.

The sessions, held in collaboration with the Jonnycake Center, will take place each Tuesday through Nov. 19. The first was on Sept. 24.

Operated through the University of Rhode Island's College of Health Sciences, the program began as a

collaboration among South County Hospital, URI faculty, local physicians and pediatric dietitians to develop an early-intervention program that would meet the needs of overweight and obese pre-adolescent children.

"We're excited to embark on this new phase of the program," Program Director Stephanie Marchand said. Marchand is a registered

pediatric dietitian who, in addition to running the program, takes part in its educational sessions.

"We see this as a crucial step in our expansion and in our ability to reach additional children and families in need," she said.

Now entering its 10th year, the program, which began as South County Food Fitness and Fun, has helped more than 160 children and their families in and around South Kingstown and Westerly learn how to make healthy lifestyle changes to their daily lives. In previous years, the program mainly relied on physician referrals. However, starting this fall the Jonnycake Center will also help identify families for the program.

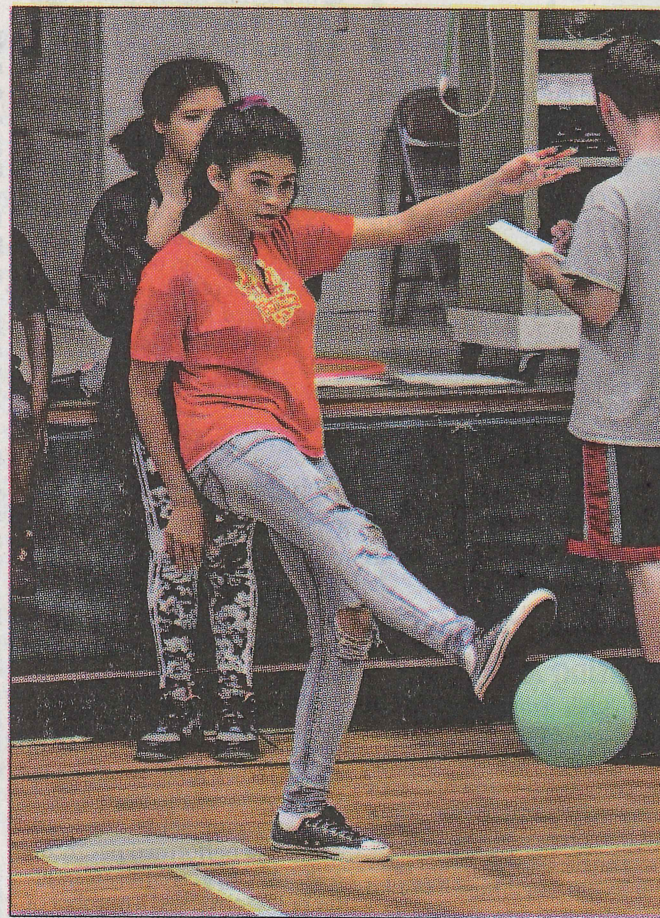
URI nutrition professor Geoffrey Greene helped to develop the program.

"Incorporating fun, hands-on activities has made a difference for our families in integrating life-long healthy behaviors into their daily routines," Greene said.

Sessions generally consist of nutrition and physical activities geared toward children and parents. Nutrition instruction is presented as a series of interactive games that test children's knowledge of food groups, nutrition, snacks versus treats or tasting new foods. This fall's sessions will also include more hands-on food and meal preparation for the entire family.

Children also are introduced to new physical activities such as yoga, team games or exercises. The instruction is focused on introducing youngsters to something fun, easily modified for their skill level and that can be done on their own at home.

Children then get to teach their parent or caregiver about the activity they've just learned and then are sent home with a



PHOTOS: MICHAEL DERR

Estrella Rivera, 11, plays kickball at the Neighborhood Guild in South Kingstown on Sept. 24 during the "Rhode Island Food, Fitness and Fun" program.

nutrition challenge and physical activity challenge for them to work on together over the course of the week.

Now supported by grants from Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, fundraising activities, donations from the medical community and volunteers from URI and the surrounding community, the program expanded from Wakefield to Westerly in the fall of 2017.

To bolster the program and reach more children and families in need, earlier this year board members decided to explore collaborating with local community organizations.

Based on their research, a new eight-week modification of the existing program was developed with the Jonnycake Center to address the specific needs of children in their community.

To encourage continued activity in winter, the YMCA of South Kingstown will offer a free three-month exercise program beginning Dec. 1 as a follow-up for kids who have completed the program.

For more information on Rhode Island Food Fitness and Fun, visit riff.uri.edu/ or call (401) 263-5488.

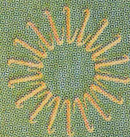
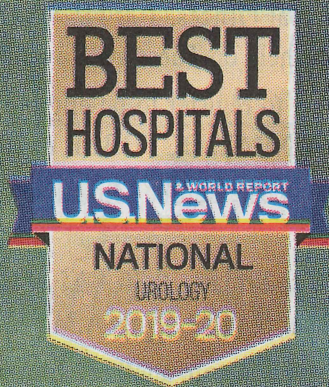
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Elgin Brown, 11, rounds the bases while playing kickball at the Neighborhood Guild in South Kingstown on Sept. 24 during the "Rhode Island Food, Fitness and Fun" program.

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