Healthy Eating Is a Family Affair

by Kimberly Dishongh

Seven-year-old Reece Chambless of Dewitt regularly takes it upon himself to remind his father that candy isn’t the best choice for him.

“He is always talking about that, for sure,” said his dad, Brad Chambless. He knows his son is right and he tries to comply, although he suspects Reece might just want the gummy bears for himself.

Reece’s parents have always tried to keep the sugar in his diet low, even while indulging themselves, but these days sweets – other than gummy bears – are a rarity in their house. “If it’s here, I’ll probably want it,” said his mother, Jay Chambless, “so we just don’t keep it here.”

Reece started paying closer attention to everyone’s nutritional needs last year when he learned about how nutrition affects the body through a program at his school called OrganWise Guys, provided by the United States Department of Agriculture nutrition education programs and the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture’s Cooperative Extension Service.

OrganWise Guys uses characters like Hardy Heart, Peri Stolic and Sir Rebrum to teach children – and, indirectly, their parents – to make good health, nutrition and lifestyle choices.

Ana Hollis, Arkansas County Extension agent, gets those lessons out to the public by putting posters and displays about best food choices in grocery stores, Department of Human Services offices and food pantries. She also demonstrates recipes at farmer’s markets and distributes information at commodities handouts.
Making the Switch

Reece has been one catalyst in his family’s move toward healthier eating in the last year and a half. His mom, however, is the one who took charge of the grocery list and started buying healthier foods.

Heart disease runs in her family, she explained, and she hopes this will help stave off potential problems. “My daddy actually died of a heart attack in 2006,” she said.

Heart disease is often linked to obesity, but Chambless’s father was slender, just as she is, so she knows it’s not enough just to maintain a healthy weight. In the beginning, she didn’t tell her family what was afoot. “The first time I did it, I sneaked the packages in so they wouldn’t know,” she laughed. “I just wanted to see how they would respond to it. I used ground turkey and whole wheat pasta and I just thought, ‘Oh, they’re not going to eat this.’ I thought they wouldn’t touch it at all.”

No one complained – she wasn’t sure they even noticed – so she kept at it, replacing pork bacon with lower-fat turkey bacon, and making peanut butter sandwiches with low-sugar or sugar-free jellies and jams. She also cut out most processed foods and started serving more fresh or frozen vegetables, and fewer high-sodium canned ones, and added fruits and high protein Greek yogurt where she could.

“It’s amazing, even with my husband – he loves to eat,” she said. “He’s been doing better with this and he’s losing weight.” Brad Chambless has lost 25 pounds in the last year. “I used to weigh probably 285 pounds and just did not feel good. If you put it in front of me, I would eat it, and that is not a healthy way to go,” he said. “I had to have my knee replaced and I thought, ‘You better get back down below 260, and you’ve got to keep it there to heal, rehab and just feel better.’ We started cooking different, eating smaller. It was a way of life or a way of thinking that I would want to have fried chicken or fried fish. Now we grill just about everything, year round.”

Cooking as a Family

On a recent day, Jay Chambless recruited Reece and his younger brother, 3-year-old Jackson, to help prepare their lunch – chicken pizza. She sautéed sliced chicken tenders in olive oil and softened whole wheat tortillas before sliding them onto baking sheets and calling in the boys. Reece used the back of a spoon to spread pizza sauce around his tortilla, and after Chambless helped Jackson with that part of the process, both boys tossed on handfuls of chicken and sprinkled mozzarella on top.

“If my husband was here I would do mushrooms, tomatoes and maybe bell peppers, but my kids won’t eat those,” Chambless said. Reece and Jackson drank water – there’s no soda in the Chambless house – with their lunch, and then eagerly awaited dessert.

Their popsicles were the kind to be doled out with no maternal guilt. Chambless had prepared them ahead of time, popping strawberries and plain Greek yogurt in the blender and then pouring that naturally-sweet concoction into a popsicle mold she picked up at the dollar store. She sometimes uses other fruits, and she sometimes adds a cup of fresh spinach for a real health kick. “It helps to get all the food groups in – that’s what we try to do,” Chambless said. “I put them in the freezer – my kids love them. And I like them, too, especially with the spinach. They just make me feel good.”

Investing in Nutrition

Chambless, director of the Pattillo Center School in Dewitt, said the hardest part of feeding her family healthier foods is finding them in the first place. Produce is plentiful in the two grocery stores in her town, unlike in some areas. But items like low-sugar or no-sugar-added products and Greek yogurt rarely find their ways to the shelves there so she has to pick those up when she’s out of town.

Eating healthier, she said, has also put a bigger dent in the family’s budget. “We can do it, but I’m not sure people with less money could,” she said. Fortunately, the Extension Services offers programs on couponing and eating right on a budget. Brad Chambless, a lawyer turned banker with Farmers and Merchants Bank in Dewitt, considers the extra cost to be a good investment.

“It’s a mindset,” he said. “If we continue down the path that we were brought up on and never change to
try to make ourselves better, our kids are learning every day from what we're doing. If we're not making it better, we're making it worse on them – exponentially. So the path that we've kind of chosen to take, I'm really proud of, that Jay's done it and that the boys are following in there. Right now it seems like we've got a good foothold on them and we've got a good program started so they are thinking better about their eating habits.”

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