

Starting a

*Children's is
leading the charge
to ensure Georgia's
kids grow up to be
Strong4Life*

Revolution



Christopher had always been a big boy. But when, at age 9, he weighed in at 140 pounds, his pediatrician was concerned. He was twice the size of a typical 9-year-old. “Christopher gained nearly 60 pounds in one year,” said his mom, Tamika Gardner. But, Gardner didn’t consider her son overweight. “I assumed he was just big, like his dad and me. He plays sports year-round, so his weight wasn’t something I worried about.”

Christopher’s weight—like nearly 40 percent of Georgia’s children who are overweight or obese—is serious cause for concern. These children are at risk for significant health-related consequences, such as heart disease, diabetes, liver problems and certain cancers, as well as social discrimination, both during their youth and as adults.

With Georgia ranking second in childhood obesity in the nation, it’s a problem the state can’t ignore. And, as a voice for Georgia’s kids, Children’s is addressing the issue. “Many agencies and individuals are doing good work, but there hasn’t been a comprehensive program to address all of Georgia’s 2.7 million kids,” said Linda Matzigkeit, SVP, Strategic Planning and Human Resources. “As an organization, Children’s first focused on employee wellness. Now, with Strong4Life well established internally, it’s time to take it to the kids.”

A complex problem

But before creating a statewide program to tackle childhood obesity—and achieve our ultimate goal of becoming a national model for child wellness—Children’s needed a firmer grip on the source of the problem. “Many families face complicated barriers to proper nutrition, such as living a long distance from grocery stores,” said Matzigkeit. “So combating obesity isn’t just about kids; it has to become a family affair with community support.” Stakeholder research (involving parents, daycare personnel, school staff and medical providers) revealed a number of findings, some surprising. For example, like Gardner, most parents aren’t aware their children are overweight. And that lack of awareness is reflected among schools and daycare centers.

In addition, health professionals generally aren’t trained to address the obesity issue with family and feel unsure of how to treat it. Meanwhile, organizations across the state are working hard to combat obesity, but research revealed redundant efforts, as well as gaps in programming, statewide. No unified program existed. And not all stakeholders have been adequately engaged in the fight against obesity.

Bottom line: Georgia’s childhood obesity crisis has become a problem of both large and complex proportion, and Children’s must step up to help our kids.

Strong4Life Healthy Habits



Kids and families should follow these four Strong4Life healthy habits every day:

- Reduce screen time to 1 hour or less
- Eat two fruits and three veggies
- Be active for at least 60 minutes
- Drink almost zero sugar-sweetened beverages

"To help children adopt these behaviors, it's the adults' job to provide healthy choices, from foods to activities. It's the kids' job to decide which options they prefer," said Stephanie Walsh, M.D., Medical Director, Child Wellness. "A healthy lifestyle often carries a negative connotation—like, 'no pain, no gain.' But there's no reason children have to see it that way. Embracing these healthy habits can be fun and rewarding...and it's up to adults to present it that way."

A 360-degree approach

The Children's solution takes a 360-degree approach, bringing all stakeholders together under the Strong4Life umbrella. First, Children's is bringing our effort to improve child wellness and tackle the obesity crisis to Macon and Columbus, where the need is high and the areas are small enough to test our tactics. Late this summer, we'll roll the program out in Atlanta, then we'll go statewide in 2012 and 2013. By 2030, Children's wants Georgia to rank near the very bottom of the national childhood obesity list.

"Our first step was to launch—in our Macon and Columbus pilots—what will be one of the largest public awareness campaigns on childhood obesity and wellness ever to hit Georgia," said Matzigkeit. "Next, scalable programs, collaborations and clinical interventions will support kids when and where they need it." This approach allows existing initiatives and organizations to partner with Children's to help kids and families lead healthier lives.

The public awareness campaign, including ads, billboards and social media, aims to establish childhood obesity as a health crisis. And the initial campaign doesn't mince words. "Kids told us they want to be talked to directly and honestly, and parents showed they were happy to ignore reality," said Tim Whitehead, VP, Marketing and Communications. "Through the campaign, we are seeking to make people uncomfortable, because parents, kids and community members must start a new dialogue."

A new standard

After we've heightened awareness and primed audiences for change, we'll help reset the standard for children's healthy living with the second phase of the public awareness campaign, which focuses on solutions through Strong4Life. The Strong4Life effort delivers fun, simple solutions that will inspire children and families to develop lifelong healthy habits, one positive step at a time.

"We've allowed the food, soda and video game industries to sell kids the message that they'll be happy if they sit on the couch, eat fast food and play video games," said Stephanie Walsh, M.D., Medical Director, Child Wellness. "But their weight limits them from doing what they want to do, like go shopping with friends or play sports. They're picked on by their peers and they're often depressed. It's time to take 'happy' back from the marketers."

In addition to the public awareness campaign, programs will target the following:

- Physicians and healthcare providers, whom we'll arm with education, diagnostic tools and patient teaching tools.
- Schools and early childcare providers, whom we'll support with teacher training, in- and after-school activities, take-home information and nutritional support.
- Partnerships, which we'll establish and expand with local and state government, industry groups and other kid-focused organizations.
- Community organizations, from grocery stores to restaurants to rec centers, who'll work with us to help families.
- Clinical interventions at Children's, to include our Camp Strong4Life, Health4Life clinics and medical treatment.
- A robust website with solutions for parents.

A vital investment

While Children's has been busy with our statewide obesity campaign, Christopher and his mom have been staying active with their family wellness plan. Christopher will attend Children's Camp Strong4Life for overweight children and is a patient in our Atlanta-based Health4Life clinic, which evaluates and treats childhood obesity. "We've learned so many good things from Children's," Gardner said. "Now, Christopher and I are exercising together, and we're both losing weight to avoid health problems down the line."

Gardner sees her investment in Christopher's health already reaping profound rewards as she watches him become Strong4Life. "It's well worth it," she says. "This amount of change takes a lot of time and effort, but I know it's what's best for my child."

To support Children's in this effort and to learn more, visit the new Strong4Life website (www.strong4life.com). ➤

In Their Own Words

Andrew and Maya are two of the faces in the public awareness ad campaigns, but they are more than just actors playing a role. Andrew and Maya are participants in Strong4Life, too. During the "teaser" shoots for the ads, both of the kids—and their families—expressed interest in getting support from Children's for their own wellness journeys, and, Children's was thrilled to help. We got the chance to ask Andrew and Maya a

few questions about what this opportunity means to them.

CC: What's the best thing about doing the ads?

Andrew: I love being able to dance and play in the TV spots!

Maya: I like knowing that I am helping other kids just like me.

CC: What are you most looking forward to doing through our Strong4Life program?

Andrew: I'm excited about being Strong4Life, and seeing my family have fun together and eat right.

Maya: I am most looking forward to meeting more kids like me...making new friends...and learning new ways to be healthier.

