



Subscriber Services

KansasCity.com

[Kansas City Star](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Cars](#) | [Homes](#)

Kansas City Star, The (MO)

2009-07-22

Section: News

Page: A1

Program in KCK strives to curb childhood obesity *MATT ERICKSON and ALAN BAVLEY, The Kansas City Star*

Alexa Suarez will jump and wave her arms today in the open air of a park, maybe stopping to snack on some vegetables or yogurt with fruit.

If every child in the **Rosedale** neighborhood around the KU Medical Center could be outside, active and eating **healthy** like Alexa, the community might not be struggling with childhood obesity.

A recent study found that 51 percent of elementary school children in **Rosedale** are overweight or obese. Even in a nation where childhood obesity rates have more than doubled in the last 30 years, that number from a KU study is high — 10 times greater than the federal government's national goal for next year.

Partly because of numbers like that, a coalition of **Rosedale** leaders received a \$225,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for a two-year effort called the **Healthy Kids** Initiative.

As a small piece of that campaign, the group today will help hold a **Healthy Kids** Carnival in Whitmore Park.

The snacks will be **healthy**, and the games will push **kids** to be active. At a cakewalk, winners will get basketballs instead of baked goods.

□ We hope that they go home thinking: □ This was really fun. You don't need to have sugar on a stick to have fun at a carnival, □ □ □ said Jane Heide, co-director of the initiative.

Kids from the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School at nearby Rainbow Mennonite Church will show off cheer routines they've learned in the summer-school program, which funds from the carnival will benefit.

But after the fun and games, the **Healthy Kids** Initiative will get back to its battle to get **kids** in **Rosedale** active and **healthy** — no easy assignment.

The obstacles for children and parents aiming for **healthy** lifestyles are many.

The area has no grocery store with mounds of fruits and vegetables — only a handful of corner markets.

Many children cannot walk to school safely because many streets lack sidewalks and crosswalks.

And the major park, **Rosedale** Park, has little to offer the community's children, who usually want to play basketball or soccer, said initiative co-director Wendy Wilson. The park has baseball diamonds, a skate park and a disc golf course, but no basketball courts or soccer fields.

□ The activities of the park, for the most part, do not address the **kids** from this community, □ Wilson said.

And that's if the **kids** can even get there. The park sits along busy Mission Road, with no sidewalk on either side.

Eric Garrett, a father of four, lives in the Belrose Manor housing project across the street. He said he couldn't imagine **kids** trying to cross the intersection between the park and the project, where traffic flies through without a stoplight or crosswalk to slow it.

Erika Suarez, Alexa's mother, said **Rosedale** children had few places to go play outside, and parents were often skittish about allowing children to play outside unattended anyway.

Nationally, **kids** have been gaining weight just as fast as their parents and other adults in recent decades.

The consequences are grim. Obese **kids** are regular targets for schoolyard taunts. The emotional stress can hinder their social development and academic performance.

Obesity increases the risk of childhood asthma, sleep apnea and type 2 diabetes. An alarming development: Many obese children and adolescents have been developing the kinds of risk factors for heart disease — high cholesterol and blood pressure — that usually don't appear until middle age.

— Pediatric obesity is continuing to increase in prevalence, — said Ann Davis, a psychologist and childhood obesity researcher at the University of Kansas Hospital.

Obesity rates run higher among children who live in lower-income households or who are members of racial or ethnic minorities, Davis said.

— That means your typical child in **Rosedale** is going to be more challenged, — she said. — There are a whole plethora of risk factors. —

Poorer neighborhoods are often regarded as unsafe, so parents don't allow their children outside unsupervised. That leads to more sedentary hours at home, Davis said.

When both parents work, television often becomes the baby sitter.

— If you turn off the TV, children lose weight, — she said.

And with supermarkets hard to reach, families may rely on nearby fast-food restaurants or corner markets that don't offer the fresh fruits and vegetables essential to a slimming diet.

Davis said a KU researcher who interviewed children in **Rosedale** found that many were stopping at a convenience store on the way home from school to buy an afternoon snack of — hot fries — and Coke.

The **Healthy Kids** Initiative is juggling several possible ways to help slim down **Rosedale**'s **kids**: More sidewalks and bike paths. Community gardens where **kids** and parents can learn to grow fruits and vegetables. Tax breaks to encourage corner stores to stock more vegetables. A — walking school bus — where volunteers lead groups of students on walks to school. Cooking classes for people who don't know what to do with onions or zucchini.

— Part of the education in an urban environment is, people are not used to using fresh produce in their meals, — Wilson said. — They go to fast food. There are tons of fast-food restaurants in **Rosedale**. —

Such measures are dedicated to helping children follow two simple directions, which Alexa Suarez knows by heart: Exercise and — eating lots of **healthy** stuff. —

Today's event — "Families from across the area are welcome at today's **Healthy Kids** Carnival at Whitmore Park in the 1400 block of Southwest Boulevard in Kansas City, Kan. Admission is free, but some activities cost 50 cents to \$2. Hours are 3 to 8 p.m. If it's raining, the event will be held in Rainbow Mennonite Church, next to the park.