

# HEALTH

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2003

## Move It, Kid

### *TV Helped Create the Childhood Obesity Problem. Can It Help Solve It?*

BY CECILIA CAPUZZI SIMON  
*Special to The Washington Post*

In the television studio of Baltimore's Spicer Productions on a recent Saturday morning, five brightly clad children are in the final stages of digestion. It's not their personal digestive tracts they are acting out, however. They are professional actors on the set of "**Dynamotion**," a health and fitness video series for kids, and they are pretending to be chunks of food, writhing and flailing with an animated hamburger through the intestinal labyrinth where they

are about to come out as . . . well, you get the picture. The soundtrack is Bobby Pickett's 1962 novelty hit "Monster Mash."

"Wow," says one of the kids with a dramatic wipe of his brow. "I've never been digested before!"

"Yeah," says another, "I feel all gooey and stuff."

It's a kind of theater of the absurd, especially when one considers that in the battle against childhood obesity, television is Public Enemy Number One. To some it is the primary cause of sedentary behavior, cravings for all foods fatty and caloric, and the dramatic rise in childhood fatness.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one out of three kids aged 6 to 19 is overweight or obese. That's triple the proportion that were carrying too much weight in 1980. But the three visual arts professionals and moms (two from Bethesda, one from Kensington) behind the federally funded "Dynamotion" project believe that to view TV only as a villain in the childhood fat epidemic is a copout—or at least a missed opportunity. No one doubts TV's power to influence and educate, they reason, so why shouldn't it be enlisted in the fight against obesity and inactivity, instead of being used as a scapegoat?

"A lot of bad things are blamed on the media," says Tyler Whitmore, a graphic designer and executive director of Adventure Theatre at Glen Echo Park. "But we like to think of television as a tool that can be used to get kids off the couch."

Amy DeLouise, president and CEO of **Take Aim Media**, a Silver Spring multimedia production company that is coordinating Dynamotion's production and marketing, agrees. Two-thirds of American children have televisions in their bedrooms, she points out, citing a Kaiser Family Foundation study, which also found that almost 20 percent of 2- to 7-year-olds and 40 percent of 8- to 18-year-olds have VCRs. And American children consume an average of nearly six hours a day of various electronic media.

Clearly, she says, "they are watching something." She, Whitmore and Anice Hoachlander, an architectural photographer and the third partner in the Dynamotion project, hope that if their plan to sell the show as a series to a broadcast or



HOACHLANDER DAVIS PHOTOGRAPHY

Dynamotion "actioneers" join their animated pal in a show of muscle power.

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# Dynamotion Moving Into Battle Against Tele-Chubbies

DYNAMOTION, *From F1*

cable outlet by year's end is successful, that "something" will include "Dynamotion."

## Good Habits Before Bad

"Dynamotion" is a perky, clever production in the "Blues Clues" and "Barney" mold. It's targeted to kids 5 to 8 years old, but its approach may actually skew to a younger audience. It combines live action with animation, and uses a heavy dose of original music—African, rap, Caribbean, Cajun—and some humor to draw in kids (and even parents) and get them up and moving. It also has a catchy theme song that tends to stick in your head long after turning the show off. Its main character is an energetic, sunglasses-wearing Dalmatian named Dynamo, whose multicolored spots can be removed and used in magical ways, like peering into someone's cardiovascular system for a lesson on how the heart works.

Each episode explores some aspect of human biology, such as the muscular system and coordination skills, lungs and aerobic activity, the brain and nervous system. So far three have been produced and will be available as stand-alone videos for use in doctors' offices, community centers and schools; another 10 have been planned.

As in "Barney" and similar programs, there is an ensemble of live actors. In "Dynamotion" it is a group of five or six kids called "Actioneers" ranging in age from 6 to 13, who meet in the Dynamotion clubhouse, where they hang out and do healthful stuff like tossing a ball, dancing or cooking up a nutritional snack. They also go on outings—maybe to the park for soccer or, as they did in the episode on digestion, to the "grossology" exhibit at the Baltimore Science Museum where they were able to travel through a model of the digestive system (the inspiration for the "Monster Mash" dance).

The producers have gathered some experienced talent to the effort. Diedrich Bader, who plays delivery guy Oswald on "The Drew Carey Show," is the voice of Dynamo. Tara Strong, the voice of Dilly on "Rug Rats," does the voice of ChaCha, a



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On the Dynamotion set, young cast members offer a lesson in preparing a healthy snack.

spunky animated Chihuahua. And Bruce Dworkin, another Hollywood actor, does the voice of Lazy Bones, an animated bulldog. Even Bobby Pickett has joined the fun, updating his "Monster Mash" as "Eating Mash" ("it's a digestive smash!").

The idea behind the show, say the creators, is not necessarily to make fat kids slim, but to educate children about their bodies, health, fitness and nutrition so that they can feel empowered and begin to make good choices about food and physical activity.

"That's why we're going after them at a young age," says DeLouise. "We want to get to them before their bad habits are established." She says the plan is modeled on the anti-smoking campaigns that seek to alter children's attitudes toward cigarettes very early on so that they never start to smoke. But, as with smoking, she says, shifting attitudes about fitness and nutrition will take "generational time."

## Beating Obesity

Eric Quivers, director of preventive cardiology at Children's National Medical Center, who helps oversee the Dynamotion partnership's research efforts, says early intervention is critical. Today, six to seven of every 10 visits to his clinic are by obese kids—200- to 300-pound preteens and 300- to 400-pound adolescents, who are

presenting with high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, liver dysfunction and even heart failure. When he started at Children's 12 years ago, obese children accounted for 10 to 20 percent of clinic visits.

Currently, he says, even in his position at the cutting edge of treatment for obese children, his biggest frustration is that once children become obese, "they don't change."

"We have to intervene early," he says, "because these kids tend not to lose weight."

The reasons are both physical and behavioral. For one thing, Quivers says, when you're overweight or morbidly obese, it is hard to be active and do the physical things required for losing weight. That then affects attitude. Kids (and adults) think, "Well, I can't lose it anyway, so why try?"

And especially for kids, who live in an environment controlled by adults, it is difficult to take action and change daily patterns and food choices, even if they are tempted to do so. At one point, Quivers got so frustrated with not being able to get his patients to lose weight that he offered them money. The deal was that if they lost five pounds in a week, he'd give them \$10. In two years, he gave away money only five times, and finally abandoned the idea.

Thomas McKenzie, a professor in the department of exercise and nutritional sci-



**Host, Dynamo, leads kids through foot-stompin' dances and body adventures.**

ences at San Diego State University and a consultant to the Dynamotion team, says it will take more than a TV show or a single event to create changes in the severely ingrained cultural and nutritional habits at the root of the problem. For example, some 50 percent of elementary schools in the country do not have physical education teachers on staff, he says.

"They are not even doing PE one time a week, let alone the five times a week that's recommended," he says. Many school districts also have cut out recess, he adds. McKenzie, who calls himself "conservative" and a "doubting Thomas," says he agreed to advise DeLouise, Whitmore and Hoachlander because he sees using television—particularly if "Dynamotion" makes it as a regular series—as a "novel event" in the battle against kids' obesity and its related ills.

"All the conferences I go to, they say, 'We need a different way!' Well, this is different," he says.

### **Getting Networks to Bite**

If the idea of using television to educate kids about health and fitness is a no-brainer, why hasn't it been done before?

"If there ever was a dire need for effective education of kids, this is it. We're in a [health] crisis," says Kathryn Montgomery, president of the Center for Media Education, a public interest group that promotes quality media for kids. "Children cannot escape the culture of consumption promoted in so much of television. There are hardly any counter-mes-

sages. Television is part of the problem. It has to be part of the solution."

Apparently the National Institutes of Health (NIH) sees that logic, too. Through its National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), DeLouise, Hoachlander and Whitmore in 1999 won a \$100,000 Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) Phase I grant. With the money, they funded a 15-minute pilot for the show and a required follow-up research study testing its effectiveness with 200 children in kindergarten and first and second grade in the Washington area. They found pretty much what they expected: The "Dynamotion" pilot motivated kids to engage in physical activity, increased their knowledge about how their bodies work, and changed their attitudes about healthy behaviors. The study was published in the fall 2002 issue of *Journal of Community and Family Health*.

Based on that success, the partners received an SBIR Phase II grant for \$750,000 last year, which has allowed them to produce two more episodes, each a half-hour long, and to design and implement a more rigorous, longitudinal study among 900 kids in different parts of the country.

If jumping through the NIH hoops and all the emphasis on scientific proof seems a bit like overkill, one has to understand the expenses and difficulties inherent in bringing a children's television show to fruition, and then trying to convince demanding cable or broadcast outlets of its worth. With production costs of \$250,000 per episode, "Dynamotion" is relatively inexpensive. Still, when you multiply that by 13 episodes, the extent of the financial commitment is clear. Unlike in Europe and Canada, the U.S. government does not provide development money specifically for children's TV.

James Steyer, the author of "The Other Parent: How the Media Shapes Our Children's Lives" and the head of an advocacy group called Families Interested in Responsible Television, calls the whole process "byzantine" and blames it for the dearth of quality programs for children. In his book, he urges parents to put their kids on a healthy media diet, and he likes Dynamotion's idea of using television to, basically, encourage kids to watch less of it. He also thinks the time is right for a health and fitness show. But he cautions

that unless "Dynamotion's" marketing is handled effectively, TV executives might view it as just more "spinach"—good for, but not liked by, kids.

Most networks want to see a programming project as a complete package, well along in production and with evidence (one function of the "Dynamotion" research) that it really does what you think it's going to do before they will even talk about it.

And then there is the "back end"—the huge amount of money that might be brought in from all sorts of ancillary products, like toys based on the show's characters. The networks want a big piece of that. (The story of how PBS was burned by failing to secure a piece of the back-end action during the "Barney" frenzy a decade ago is television-industry legend.) Assuming the program's creator has plans for such products, they'll have to provide an attractive profit split with the network. And what about foreign distribution, Web sites, CD-ROMs and supplemental educational materials?

The "Dynamotion" crew seems poised to respond. Amy DeLouise, an award-winning producer who has been in the television production business for 13 years, is leading the team in developing a "Dynamotion" Web site ([www.dynamotion.com/](http://www.dynamotion.com/)), CD-ROM, Web-enabled games, community outreach pieces and teacher supplements. Her next big project after filming these last two episodes is to get the show sold as a series. She says she's close.

At a recent television programming conference, a huge marketplace of ideas and product, "Dynamotion" drew a lot of interest, she says, more so than in years past. In part this is because the partners had actual product to show. But the timing may be right, too. At least three other proposals for similar programs circulated at the convention, and the concept appears to be hitting a nerve, even among hardened TV honchos.

Perhaps, says DeLouise, there's a trickle-down effect occurring: After so many years of focusing on obese adults, attention is finally beginning to shift to kids. ■

*Cecilia Capuzzi Simon last wrote for Health about Positive Psychology.*