

First lady takes lead on obesity

BY JULEYKA LANTIGUA-WILLIAMS

We should cheer first lady Michelle Obama for taking on childhood obesity as a personal crusade. The attention she is paying to it should help all our kids, and black and Latino kids will likely be especially touched by her influence.

The reality is stark. Nationally, 32 percent of children and adolescents are obese or overweight. That's one in every three.

The prevalence of obesity among children 6-11 has more than doubled in the last 20 years to 20 percent.

The obesity rate among adolescents 12-19 has more than tripled, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For black and Latino children, the numbers are epidemic. Black youth have a 51 percent higher prevalence of obesity, while Latinos have a 21 percent higher obesity prevalence than whites, according to the CDC.

"The surge in obesity in this country is nothing short of a public health crisis, and it's threatening our children, it's threatening our families," Obama said while announcing her plan.

She is absolutely right about that, and I hope she has a huge impact for millions of children and youth in the country. And for black and Latino families, her impact may be greatest.

First off, Obama is an educated, professional black woman with two children. Never before have tens of millions of black and Latino moms had such a mirror-image role model. Many will identify with her and her struggles before moving to the White House to

make good choices for her own daughters, a point she readily admitted.

"I knew that I had to do something, that I had to lead our family to a different way," she said.

Black and Latina mothers will recognize themselves in this statement. They are usually the leaders in their families when it comes to issues related to health and nutrition. Their kids will be better off if they start implementing changes similar to those the first lady introduced to her family - less TV time, more fresh fruits, more physical activity, less fast food.

And let's not underestimate the influence the two first daughters may have. I can hear it now: Moms all around the country telling their kids, "You know, Sasha and Malia love carrots and broccoli." In our times, nothing rivals celebrity and pop culture influences. And no group is more easily influenced than kids.

The three tenets of Obama's plan - access, convenience and affordability - hit at the heart of what keeps many black and Lati-

no families from eating more healthfully. With millions of us living in urban areas, our access to fresh produce on a daily basis is unreliable. We often peruse entire produce isles filled with nearly rotten fruits and vegetables.

There are no weekly farmers markets in most urban neighborhoods. And if we do venture to a high-end supermarket in the loftier parts of town, we spend one week's worth of grocery money on two bags of overpriced staples.

The first lady has chosen to tackle an issue that has been plaguing the country as a whole, but that has stubbornly embedded itself in black and Latino families. Her leadership in this area will go a long way in encouraging our families to make the changes needed to safeguard our children's immediate health and, ultimately, their future.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams is a writer for Progressive Media Project, a source of liberal commentary on domestic and international issues; it is affiliated with The Progressive magazine.



In June 2009, Michelle Obama shells peas with District of Columbia school-children after they harvested vegetables from her White House garden.

The Associated Press

