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MEDIA RELEASE

A leading researcher believes a new Rugby League program being trialled this week can become a key weapon in the fight against childhood obesity.

At a time when rising childhood obesity rates have become a topic of national discussion, The University of Queensland's Children's Nutrition Research Centre Director Associate Professor Peter Davies has endorsed a ground-breaking health program that Rugby League's One Community will launch this week in communities across Australia.

The Eat Well, Play Well, Stay Well program aims to use the high profile of NRL stars to communicate positive health messages to children and families and help reduce the incidences of childhood obesity.

"If a child can be encouraged to adopt healthy eating and exercise behaviour at an early age, he or she is more likely to continue this behaviour throughout life," Associate Professor Peter Davies says.

"Community heroes can play a big part in promoting this positive behaviour. Having a sporting hero telling you to eat your greens may have more impact than mum or dad telling you the same thing."

The Eat Well, Play Well, Stay Well program is supported by the Children's Hospital Foundations Australia and comes at a time when key findings from Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey reveal that:

- 17% of boys and girls are classified as overweight, 6% as obese and 5% as underweight;
- more than 30% of children don't have the recommended hour of moderate to vigorous activity each day;

- 80% of children aged 4-8 don't meet the dietary guidelines for vegetable intake (95% of 14-16 year olds) and 39% of children aged 4-8 don't meet the dietary guidelines for fruit intake (99% of 14-16 year olds).

National Rugby League Chief Executive, David Gallop, says: "This program is a unique concept in Australian sport and it will be great to see the response it receives in schools across Australia this week.

"Childhood obesity is a major social issue in Australia and, with the support of the Children's Hospital Foundations Australia and the Children's Nutrition Research Centre, Rugby League is proud to be playing a part in encouraging children and families to adopt healthy and active lifestyles."

The Eat Well, Play Well, Stay Well program will be unveiled during this week's Rugby League Community Carnival, which runs from February 4-6 and features more than 100 players visiting 206 schools across the Northern Territory, and regional NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

The program's creator, NRL Director of Community Relations, Trish Crews, says that the idea for the program came from seeing the impact similar sports programs were having in the United States.

"I was shocked to find out that Australia had overtaken the USA in terms of overweight children per capita. Now, more than ever before, there is a critical mass around teaching children and their families about the impact that their lifestyle choices will have on them now and well into the future," Crews says.

The program will feature television commercials, a health DVD to be used in primary schools, educational resources, a kit for every child who registers for junior Rugby League that gives them information on how to Eat Well, Play Well and Stay Well in preparation for playing Rugby League on a weekend and, further down the track, there will be a mobile classroom which will travel to rural and regional areas.

The fundamentals of the program are as follows;

EAT WELL

- Identifying the differences between 'everyday' foods (fruit, vegetables, bread, cereals, lean meat, etc) and 'sometimes' foods (cakes, lollies, chips, etc)
- Encouraging children to 'drink well' – choosing water over soft drink or juice and making sure they stay hydrated before and after exercise
- Teaching children about the importance of eating breakfast and the dangers of skipping meals

PLAY WELL

- Showing children that playing a team sport is not only great for fitness but is also an excellent way to make friends
- Giving children new ideas about activities they can engage in – riding their bike to school, jumping on a trampoline, walking the dog, etc.
- Explaining that playing well isn't about who can run the fastest or who is the most coordinated – it's all about having fun while you exercise
- Talking about how playing well equals playing fair – anger, frustration and abusive behaviour have no place in sport

STAY WELL

- Teaching children that it's okay to talk to teachers or relatives if something is upsetting them
- Explaining that staying well is all about being happy, relaxed and comfortable, as well as eating the right foods and exercising enough.

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