

Stewart: Fit4Kids programs combat childhood obesity with activity, healthy eating

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MARY DUNNE STEWART | Posted: Monday, September 10, 2012 1:00 am

Here are some startling facts. The typical 18-year-old graduating from high school has spent more time in front of a television screen than in the classroom. Today's youth may be the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Children today are less active and less healthy than ever. Lack of physical activity and poor diets have contributed to a national obesity epidemic.

Today, more than a third of American children age 6-19 are overweight or obese. The prevalence of childhood obesity has more than tripled since 1980 and the health toll on these children over the course of their lifetimes will be profound. In fact, estimates indicate that one in three American children born in the year 2000 will develop diabetes if they adopt the nation's lifestyle of physical inactivity and unhealthy eating. It is imperative for our children's future to reverse these deadly trends.

Greater Richmond Fit4Kids is a nonprofit started in 2010 by the Sports Backers with support from the Robins Foundation. Our mission is clear — to improve the health and wellness of children in the greater Richmond region through physical activity and healthy eating. We are striving to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in our region.

To reach this goal, we are working directly with schools to implement physical activity and nutrition programming that has proven successful in other school divisions nationwide. This month, in conjunction with the start of school and Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, Fit4Kids will launch three programs — Recess Coaching, Wellness Integration and Learning Gardens.

Physicians and experts recommend that children get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. Fit4Kids programs are designed to increase the amount of activity children engage in during the school day without taking away from vital instructional time.

Simple steps can be very effective. Fit4Kids' Recess Coaches will be placed at four partner elementary schools to cultivate a recess environment that encourages all children to participate in physically active games. The coaches will use basic supplies such as balls, jump ropes and cones to lead activities that get kids moving. For more than 15

years, PlayWorks, a national nonprofit, has worked with schools from Baltimore to Oakland to implement Recess Coaching and has found that kids are more active and, in addition, that the more structured play reduces bullying and improves behavior and academic performance.

At one partner elementary school, Fit4Kids has placed a Wellness Integration Specialist. This individual is a licensed, experienced teacher, who will work with the teachers on integrating physical activity into the curriculum. For example, instead of subtracting numbers on a worksheet, children will get out of their seats to play subtraction tag, a fun, active game that will also teach them appropriate math lessons. Wellness Integration is based on a successful program that has been implemented in Williamsburg-James City County for more than five years.

This fall, in an effort to improve nutrition and food choices, with support from the Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation, Fit4Kids will partner with five public schools, St. Joseph's Villa, and a Boys and Girls Club to install learning gardens. Based on the Edible Schoolyard model in Berkeley, Calif., the Learning Gardens will engage children in garden maintenance, plantings, regular classroom nutrition education, and cooking demonstrations. When piloting this program last spring, we encountered an 11-year-old who had never tasted a carrot and an 8-year-old who had never tried a strawberry. Exposing the children to fresh fruits and vegetables is key in improving children's diets.

In addition to our programmatic work with schools, Fit4Kids has received support from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth to lead a regional childhood obesity prevention coalition. Community partnerships and cross-sector engagement are essential to effectively improve children's health and wellness. With the support of the Richmond City Health District, Martin's announced it has replaced candy and sugary drinks with healthier options at several checkout lanes in eight local Martin's stores. Under the guidance of SlowFood RVA, the coalition is creating a healthy school toolkit and will work with at least three schools to make improvements to benefit children's wellness.

The regional coalition is partnering with Health Diagnostic Laboratories Inc. to sponsor a screening of one segment of the HBO documentary "Weight of the Nation." We encourage community members interested in getting involved in improving children's health and wellness to join us at this Richmond documentary premier on Sept. 13 at 5:15 p.m. at the Science Museum of Virginia.

Combating the childhood obesity epidemic will take time, but partnerships and community engagement are key ingredients in the fight for children's wellness. Come to the Science Museum on Sept. 13 and learn how we all can be part of the solution.