

Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures

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“The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake. This isn’t the kind of problem that can be solved overnight, but with everyone working together, it can be solved. So, let’s move.” – *First Lady Michelle Obama*

Regular physical activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Making physical activity a priority and encouraging good habits in children from an early age is important and can help them to develop the skills they need to continue being active throughout their lives. When children exercise, they just feel good. [Greater Richmond Fit4Kids](#) is getting kids moving, making nutrition fun, and inspiring communities to invest in our

schools and children to inspire them to be healthy. Greater Richmond Fit4Kids is a non-profit organization that works to improve children’s health and wellness and reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in the Richmond region through programs that promote physical activity and healthy eating. The Sports Backers started the organization in 2010 with support from a local private family foundation, the Robins Foundation, in response to the increased prevalence of childhood obesity in the Greater Richmond region. Research shows that children today are less active and less healthy than ever. Experts claim that today’s youth will be the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Lack of physical activity and poor diets have created a national obesity epidemic that is particularly acute in low-income and minority communities.

With the advances in technology, it has become harder, not easier to raise healthy kids. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents more than tripled from 1980-2008. Today, more than one-third of American children, ages 6-19, are overweight or obese, 24% of the young adults over 17 being too overweight to even join the military. Physical activity paired with unhealthy diet-habits often established during youth-are directly associated with increases in high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes. According to research by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, obesity and poverty have an inverse relationship- lower income levels translate into higher rates of obesity and related diseases like diabetes. In response to these statistics and after two years of research, fundraising, and collaboration, Fit4Kids launched its first school-based programs in 2012 with a focus on schools with a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch and schools that receive Title I funds.

It is proven that physical activity and healthy eating helps children:

- Stay at a healthy weight
- Reduce their risk of feeling stressed or depressed
- Reduce their risk In developing obesity-related illnesses
- Builds their strength, flexibility, and endurance
- Enhance their motor and social skills, and brain development
- Sleep better
- Feel confident about themselves and their bodies as they grow
- Fewer behavior and disciplinary problems
- Perform better in school and have longer attention span in class





Fit4Kids programs are based on the premise that regular physical activity and healthy eating result in meaningful healthy benefits. For example, research shows that physical activity is critical to healthy growth-it can improve bone health and muscular strength as well as help maintain a healthy weight. Currently, only 45 minutes per week of physical education are allotted for elementary school children. The 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children and adolescents should participate in 60 minutes of physical activity every day. In Virginia, only 26.2% of children, ages 6-17, participate in any vigorous physical activity every day, according to the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health. Fit4Kids offers programs at elementary schools in Richmond, Henrico, and Chesterfield that are designed to increase the amount of physical activity that children receive during the school day and promote and encourage healthy eating. Within the first seven months of implementation, these programs have reached nearly 3,700 children in the Greater Richmond region.

In addition to successfully implementing a number of school-based programs, the organization has spearheaded a regional childhood obesity coalition, the Greater Richmond Coalition for Healthy Children, with support from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth.

“Research shows that children need physical activity. Fit4Kids does not take away from classroom time, but compliments,” comments Mary Dunne Stewart, Executive Director of Greater Richmond Fit4Kids. “With structured recess, there is more adult engagement, less conflicts on the playground, and children come back to class ready to learn”.

Fit4Kids Programs

Fit4Kids school-based programs include the following:

Recess Coaching

Using energy, imagination, and proven techniques, Fit4Kids Recess Coaches cultivate an inclusive environment that encourages all children to participate regardless of athletic ability, weight, or disability. With extensive training from Playworks, an organization working on-site with schools for more than 15 years, Fit4Kids offers Recess Coaching at Woodville, Oak Grove, and St. Andrew's elementary schools in Richmond and Bellwood Elementary in Chesterfield County. Using basic supplies such as balls, jump ropes, and cones, the Coaches participate in recess every day by leading play activities that foster physical, social, and emotional development of the children. Improved playtime has the wellness benefit of increased physical activity, and studies have shown that attendance, classroom behavior, and problems with bullying have also improved. Surveys indicate that teachers and principals at Fit4Kids partner schools think the Recess Coaching program has increased the level of activity during recess. Anecdotal feedback from principals indicates that office referrals and clinic visits resulting from recess have dramatically decreased. All students at each of the elementary schools participate in recess activities daily with the Fit4Kids recess coaches. At Woodville and Oak Grove elementary schools in Richmond, the recess-coaching program impacts approximately 866 students.



Wellness Integration

Fit4Kids implements a Wellness Integration Program to empower elementary classroom teachers so that they are motivated, skilled, and comfortable integrating physical activity and nutrition information into the core curriculum. Currently, the program is offered at Bellwood Elementary School where Fit4Kids has placed a full-time Wellness Integration Specialist at the school. The Wellness Integration Specialist is an experienced, licensed teacher, who works with other teachers on integrating physical activity and kinesthetic teaching strategies into the SOL-based curriculum. Wellness Integration is a successful model developed by the School Health Initiative Program (SHIP), which is a partnership between the Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools. In the first 128 days of this school year, the Wellness Integration Specialist at Bellwood Elementary has taught more than 300 active lessons totaling more than 5,750 minutes of activity in the classroom. In a typical class, the Wellness Integrator teaches for 22 minutes and children are out of their seats roughly 18 of the 22 minutes.

“Fit4Kids is working to create healthier habits today for a healthier tomorrow.” comments Tom Byrd, Founding Chairman of the Board of Directors of Fit4Kids, and an active volunteer.

Learning Gardens

Fit4Kids partners with five schools and two community partners to implement a comprehensive garden-based education program with the goal of teaching students to grow, prepare, and eat healthy food. The garden program engages children in garden maintenance, monthly garden and nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, and tastings. Fit4Kids installed learning gardens at Bellwood and Elizabeth Scott Elementary Schools in Chesterfield County and replanted and expanded existing gardens at Evergreen Elementary in Chesterfield and Lakeside Elementary in Henrico. A fifth learning garden was installed at Oak Grove Elementary in April. In partnership with Backyard Farmer, SOL-based lessons are implemented at all of our school garden sites. The farmers work with the teachers to teach various science, math, and Virginia studies lessons in the garden. Lessons cover a wide range of topics including plant cycles, ecosystems, seed starting and germination, the history of agriculture in Virginia,



and often include the preparation of a healthy meal using ingredients from the garden such as greens, carrots, beets, and radishes. In January and February, Fit4Kids had over 1,950 students attend garden-based lessons with Fit4Kids. At three Fit4Kids schools in Chesterfield and Henrico, gardening lessons are complemented with monthly cooking classes led by our partner, Edible Education. These classes provide an opportunity for students to learn how to prepare healthy meals with the goal of helping them develop healthy eating patterns for life. Sample recipes include kale chips, breakfast burritos with tomatillos, fresh squeezed citrus juices, pumpkin soup, and spinach, feta, and red onion frittatas.

In addition to the school sites, Fit4Kids installed gardens at St. Joseph’s Villa and the Boys and Girls Club- West End Teen Center. At the Boys and Girls Club Randolph Club, club members worked alongside Backyard Farmer and Fit4Kids staff to install three 4×12 raised beds, a number of fruit trees, and an herb spiral on-site. Three times a week around 15 youth participate in garden club activities where they learn about growing produce, garden maintenance, and healthy lifestyles. The main objective of the program is to involve Club members in all aspects of tending the garden as a way to increase exposure and access to fresh fruits and vegetables and help them develop lifelong healthy eating habits.



In addition to garden activities, club members participate in cooking classes led by Edible Education, where they learn how to prepare healthy meals and snacks. When possible, produce from the garden is incorporated into the recipes. For many of the club members, this is the first time that they have ever tried a specific fruit and/or vegetable. The program provides an opportunity for the club members to benefit from an increased understanding of healthy and nutritious food, leading to other healthier food choices and increased health and wellness for themselves and their families. After the first session last year, the vast majority of the students reported sharing these recipes with family members and making them at home.

The Greater Richmond Coalition for Healthy Children

With support from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth, Greater Richmond Fit4Kids and its multi-sector partners are also leading a coalition focused on implementing childhood obesity prevention activities and initiatives in Richmond City and the counties of Henrico and Chesterfield. This coalition is one of several Healthy Community Action Teams that is utilizing evidence-based best practices to reduce and prevent childhood obesity throughout Virginia. Working together, Fit4Kids and its partners have implemented numerous programs, projects, and initiatives to increase knowledge about healthy lifestyles, support healthy eating and physical activity, and improve environments so that healthy food and physical activity are available where children and families live, work, learn, and play. The coalition is implementing a number of initiatives and activities throughout the Richmond region including the Healthy Ideas checkout lanes project at MARTIN's, a school food environment project with three local middle/high schools, community gardens at St. Joseph's Villa and the Boys and Girls Club West End Teen Center, and community education including a major school food environment symposium in June.

In partnership with the Richmond City Health District and MARTIN'S Food Markets, Fit4Kids launched the healthy checkout aisles project to encourage customers to think healthy at the checkout lanes. At eight MARTIN'S stores in the region, four of which are located in the City of Richmond, two check-out lanes have been designated "Healthy Ideas" lanes and contain healthy food items such as fresh fruit, nuts, nutrition bars, and flavored water.

"Creating these health aware aisles was very difficult. The stores worked with dietitians and removed all the junk," comments Stewart. "All of the aisles have a nutritional standard, including lifestyle magazines".

The project is designed to promote healthy eating and physical activity by increasing the availability of healthy food choices in grocery store checkout lanes with the goal of impacting children's health through environmental changes. Studies have shown that strategies aimed at changing the grocery store environment affect what shoppers purchase and that 60 percent of purchase decisions in the supermarket are unplanned or spur of the moment. In a recent national survey of shoppers, two-thirds said that they were actively looking for ways to improve their health and wellness by making healthy choices when shopping for groceries. But of those shoppers, only half agreed that their supermarket helped them find the healthy options. This project encourages customers to choose healthier options by making the "healthy choice the easy choice."

The Healthy School Food Environment project works with local middle and high schools to support new or existing initiatives that encourage healthy food options in the school environment and seeks to provide support to school staff and parents as they create School Wellness Committees. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Pew Trust define the school food environment as the school setting for students' dietary intake, including when and where children obtain food and the types of options that are available. The environment consists of foods and beverages in school meals including the breakfast and lunch programs, fund-raisers, hallway and lunchroom vending machines, lunchroom a la carte lines, snack and other food carts, and food stores. The environment also includes food items that are not for sale, such as classroom party foods, treats, and student rewards. Fit4Kids is currently offering \$1,000 in funding to one middle or high school in Chesterfield, Richmond, and Henrico interested in creating healthier school food environments using strategies recommended by the Institute of Medicine. Sample project includes developing and distributing a resource list to help school groups raise money without selling unhealthy food items and engaging students and parents in school menu development.

How Can You Help Fit4Kids

Funding for Fit4Kids programs comes from a number of private foundation and corporate grants as well as individual donations. Fit4Kids also raises funds through two Sports Backers events for which Fit4Kids is the charity partner. The Times Dispatch Go! Discover Richmond event on Saturday, May 4, 2013 is a 6.2-mile course through Richmond that highlights downtown Richmond, the Capitol, Jackson Ward and Oregon Hill. This un-timed fitness walk takes place on city sidewalks and includes live music, sidewalk sales, costumed re-enactors and other activities to keep participants entertained throughout the course. For more information, visit: <http://www.sportsbackers.org/events/go-discover-richmond>.



The Connects Federal Corporate 4-Miler on Saturday, June 6, 2013 is an annual corporate run/walk that will be held at the Innsbrook Office Park, finishing on Dominion's campus. The event is a great opportunity for employers to promote the message of employee health and wellness. There is no individual timing at this event, encouraging runners and walkers alike to participate. Companies can register an unlimited number of participants, and spouses and friends of employees are invited to partake in the festivities as well. For more information, visit: <http://www.sportsbackers.org/events/corporate-4-miler>.

Finally, on July 13, 2013, sign up for the James River Splash and Dash with the James River Association. For more information, visit: <http://www.jrava.org/splash-and-dash/richmond/index>.

For all these events, individuals can donate to Fit4Kids online when they register for the events.

On June 19, the Greater Richmond Coalition for Healthy Children will be hosting their inaugural Growing Healthy School Symposium at the Science Museum in Richmond. The Growing Healthy Schools symposium will showcase both regional and national best practices related to school gardens and school food. Attendees from across metro Richmond will gather to hear national and local experts share tactics for creating a healthy school environment, including community-based approaches and policy changes. Participants will learn about agriculture in the classroom and integrating physical activity and wellness in the lower grade schools. Registration is limited to 100 people, and tickets (only \$10 and includes lunch) can be purchased at: www.grfit4kids.org.



Fit4Kids can always use volunteers to represent Fit4Kids at various community events such as health fairs and summer festivals. If you have a background in nutritional education or as a fitness instructor, Fit4Kids can use your help with community events. Fit4Kids is also seeking parent volunteers to help with recess coaching at Woodville Elementary School. Any parents or caretakers of children who attend Woodville Elementary are needed as volunteers to help assist recess coaches in leading games and activities during recess time. Fit4Kids is currently working on developing additional volunteer and internship opportunities for the recess coaching and garden programs. These opportunities will be posted on the Fit4Kids website and Facebook page when they become available.

It is evident that Fit4Kids is changing the face of obesity in Richmond. Children are getting healthier and more active, and in turn helping our communities grow. Fit4Kids provides the resources schools need for them to be sustainable for years to come. Continue to help them make a difference.

For more information on Greater Richmond Fit4Kids, please visit: www.grfit4kids.org.