

Greater Richmond Fit4Kids

Reversing the Devastating Trend of Childhood Obesity

By **Bethany Brady Spalding** - September 30, 2013

Clementines, cucumbers, mini-carrots, and apples served at after-school activities; kids participating in organized activities during recess; a child riding a stationary bike while reading in class. Lofty goals or reality?



“This is the kind of energy we’re trying to bring to Richmond’s kids by increasing physical activity and healthy eating,” says Mary Dunne Stewart, executive director of Fit4Kids, the organization that’s determined to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in the Richmond region. These days, kids are less active than ever before.

The prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents More than tripled from 1980 to 2008. The alarming result? Today’s youth will be the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Today, more than one-third of American children from six to nineteen are overweight or obese.

Greater Richmond Fit4Kids seeks to reverse those statistics. This non-profit organization partners with schools, teachers and students to improve children's health and wellness, and reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in the Richmond region. They do this by offering programs that promote physical activity and healthy eating.

In 2010, there was no regional organization focused exclusively on preventing childhood obesity. To fill that void, Sports Backers launched Fit4Kids with support from the Robins Foundation. Two years later, Fit4Kids launched its first school-based programs at five elementary schools in Richmond, Henrico, and Chesterfield. Within the first seven months of programming, Fit4Kids reached nearly 3,700 children in the region through its recess coaching, wellness integration, and learning garden programs.

"Since we started using the Fit4Kids programs at Bellwood Elementary we see our kids more engaged and more excited to participate in class. The activities allow us to reinforce the concepts of fair play and problem-solving while also providing much needed exercise," says Jennifer Rudd, principal of the Chesterfield County elementary school. With support from Fit4Kids, initiatives that promote healthier lifestyles are reaching today's kids in their schools, where they spend so much of their time.

Recess coaching implements fun, physically-active, and engaging play opportunities during recess time. The Fit4Kids coaches are trained by Playworks, a national organization, to lead games at partner schools – boosting activity levels during recess among all children, regardless of ability.

Through wellness integration, certified specialists create lessons for teachers that incorporate movement to promote physical activity and wellness. Learning gardens and cooking classes in the schools give children hands-on experience in healthy eating. Children participate in garden maintenance, plantings, nutrition activities, and tastings throughout the year with the goal of teaching students to grow, prepare, and eat healthy food.

"It's our hope that kids who experience Fit4Kids wellness

programming will share that knowledge with their families and live a healthy lifestyle at home," Stewart says.