

RAISING HEALTHY

kids

THE PARENT EMPOWERMENT GUIDE

6 Healthy Habits to Start NOW

Get Moving!

How to Make Exercise Fun

Mix Up the Menu

Ideas for Better Eating



Why Healthy Kids Matter to Us



Medtronic's Art Collins and Penny Hunt

Mpls.St.Paul Magazine recently asked Art Collins, Medtronic chairman and CEO, and Penny Hunt, Medtronic vice president of community affairs and the Medtronic Foundation, about Medtronic's efforts in raising healthy kids:

MSP: Why is Medtronic so interested in healthy kids?

Art Collins: Medtronic's interest in raising healthy kids is linked directly to our corporate mission of alleviating pain, restoring health, and extending life. It's also part of Medtronic's mission to be involved in the community and committed to improving the health of people and communities where our employees live and work. Healthy kids are vital to the future of vibrant, strong communities. As a health company, Medtronic invests energy and resources into solutions for healthier families because it's the right thing to do. We focus on health because it's an area we understand well and one in which we can make unique and positive contributions.

Penny Hunt: If you look at one important health indicator, obesity, it's clear that our society is facing significant challenges. Obesity rates in children and adolescents have doubled during the last twenty years. Obese kids tend to become obese adults, who experi-

ence higher rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension. These chronic diseases are complicated to manage, expensive to treat, and have a tremendously negative impact on quality of life.

MSP: What is Medtronic doing in the areas of childhood nutrition and exercise? Are there any particular problems you are addressing?

Art: Medtronic partners with non-profit health and community organizations to provide kids and their parents with resources about healthy lifestyles. This year we'll invest more than \$1.5 million in health initiatives in the Twin Cities, including programs that promote nutrition and exercise—both of which go a long way toward improving general health and ultimately preventing obesity and chronic diseases.

Penny: We also look for ways to support local community champions like Bryan Bass (see story in this section). The Medtronic Foundation gave his school a grant to recognize Bryan's efforts to replace high-calorie beverages at North High School in Minneapolis with healthier choices. In St. Paul, we fund health clinics at a handful of high schools so students who have had limited access to health resources can learn about exercise, nutrition, and healthy lifestyle choices. And we're looking to identify programs that help new immigrants maintain active and healthy lifestyles as they transition to their new lives here.

MSP: What will Medtronic be doing in the future?

Penny: We are offering small, one-time Fitness and Nutrition (FAN)

grants to schools in the Twin Cities metropolitan area to recognize school fitness programs and to encourage schools to promote creative physical activity and nutrition initiatives (see end of section for more information). Individual changes at a young age can make a big difference.

MSP: Art, what would you say to other business leaders about the importance of supporting programs for healthy kids?

Art: Everyone agrees that it's critical to maintain healthy exercise and nutrition habits, starting at a young age. The economic, physical, and emotional costs of not doing so are staggering—for individuals, for employers, and for society. The challenge now is to move beyond simply recognizing the crisis in children's health, to taking steps that solve the problem. I would encourage other business leaders to support healthy kids in a way that works best for their organizations.

MSP: You're both parents. How did you help your own kids stay healthy when they were young?

Penny: My kids had lots of energy and wanted to eat all the time, so it was a challenge. I always had to think ahead and be ready with healthy food choices. It was tricky, but I managed to convince them that strawberries were a bigger treat than candy.

Art: Exercise and family meals were important. My wife and I were lucky in that both our daughters were active in sports of all types. We also worked very hard at ensuring that we all had dinner together. It wasn't always easy with our busy schedules, but it paid dividends.



The Rattke family makes healthy eating—and eating together—a priority.

How to Raise Healthy Kids

Parents hold the key to a lifetime of healthy habits that can start today.

By Mary Van Beusekom ■ Photography by Craig Bares

In Kim and Rollie Rattke's home, healthy habits come first. "Our rule is that our kids have to have two healthy snacks before they can have junk food," Kim says. Kim, thirty-seven, and Rollie, thirty-nine, who own a construction company in Lester Prairie, Minnesota, provide yogurt, string cheese, carrots and dip, crackers and cheese, and pretzels to nine-year-old Spencer and six-year-old Madisyn. And almost every time, the kids don't ask for that unhealthy snack, making junk food all but obsolete.

Snack time at the Rattkes is a radical departure from the free-for-all that Kim experienced growing up. "When we'd get home from school, it would be Junk Food City," she says, citing chips and dip, cookies, and cake as the top offenders. "We weren't really taught to eat healthy."

And the Rattkes are also leading by example when it comes to exercise. When Kim goes for a walk, her kids bike alongside her. The family plays bas-

Raising Healthy Kids

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ketball and catch together, too. Fortunately, this desire to be active is now ingrained in Spencer and Madisyn. "My kids like to play their PlayStation and watch TV, but it's not like I have to drag them away to go outside," Kim says.

The Radtkes exemplify the positive behavior modeling that children's health experts advocate. Maybe you haven't been buying the best foods at the grocery store, or perhaps your family's form of entertainment is in front of the TV every night. Certainly, lifestyle is not the only factor that influences obesity rates; economics and ethnicity, for example, also play an important role. Regardless, getting your kids (and yourself) on a healthy path is a great starting point; after all, you have the power to set your children up for a lifetime of healthy habits. The key is to start now.

How to Get Started

Pam Van Zyl York, chairperson of Action for Healthy Kids Minnesota, the state partner of a national organiza-

tion that addresses childhood nutrition, acknowledges that instilling and reinforcing good habits is not always easy. "It does take a certain amount of discipline to say, 'You have this choice and you have that choice,'" rather than allowing children free rein, she says. Van Zyl York should know; a parent herself, she works with Minnesota schools, communities, and other

“Ultimately, parents need to remember that they are in control of their child's diet.”

groups to instill healthy eating and exercise habits in children.

Van Zyl York's organization aims to empower parents by giving them the right tools to steer kids of all ages away from bad choices—like sugary soda—toward good choices that will help them grow up healthy. It may feel like an uphill battle in a culture that seems to encourage poor eating and inactivity. About 16 percent of children and adolescents are overweight. In the last twenty years, the rate of weight problems has doubled in children and tripled in adolescents, leading to rising rates of diseases that once affected mostly adults, such as heart disease and type II diabetes. Other side effects of poor nutrition can include sleep disorders, joint pain, liver problems, unhealthy teeth and gums, and hypertension.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you start making healthier choices in your home.

Availability of good foods and

the absence of bad foods in the home is key. Kids will eat what's there and will not acquire a taste for sweet, salty, and fatty foods. For example, Van Zyl York says she keeps a bag of baby carrots in the fridge for her kids. "My kids eat those like other kids eat potato chips," she says. Many times children prefer healthier foods, she says, and parents just don't realize it. In her research, teenagers said that one of their favorite foods is fresh strawberries. "We often forget that chips and chocolate bars are not their favorite foods," she says.

If at all possible, go to the supermarket by yourself. Mary Story, a professor in the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health, says that time and cultural pressures often undermine parents' efforts to feed their kids well, which can make trips to the supermarket especially difficult. "There are so many pressures on children now, with advertising and really aggressive marketing that make children pester their parents to buy certain foods, and they tend to be really unhealthy foods," Story says.

Don't be afraid to say no. Ultimately, parents need to remember that they are in control of their child's diet, says William Dietz, MD, a pediatrician and director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's division of nutrition and physical activity. "Parents need to take these steps," he says. "They don't need to explain why. Parents think they need their children to agree with them, when in fact, they're entitled to make these decisions because they're grown up."

Dietz even goes so far as to recommend that young children ask their parents for permission to access the refrigerator. "There should be rules about refrigerator access," he says. "They should not be allowed to go to the refrigerator and get [food], because it's up to the parents to decide what they're going to eat."

As kids hit the teen years, parents



variety of studies suggests that our country's video-game-playing and TV-viewing habits play a role in promoting inactivity and exposing children to ads for foods with poor nutritional value. "The worst thing parents can do is put a television in a child's room," Dietz says.

have to relinquish some control when their kids are away from home, but house rules about nutrition should still stand. "Parents need to say, 'This is the dinner menu. If you're not hungry, I'll put it aside and you can eat it later,'" Dietz says. Teens who grow up in a household that promotes good eating habits are likely to adopt those habits as their own.

Limit TV and computer time. A

Get out of the house. When possible, encourage your kids to play outside. Sometimes, though, kids who grow up in neighborhoods in which it's considered unsafe to play outdoors may find themselves in front of the TV more, says Lawrence Cheskin, MD, associate professor in the Johns Hopkins-Bloomberg School of Public Health and director of its Weight Management Program. If your neighborhood is not a

Get kids involved in yardwork, like raking and gardening.

good place for kids to play, find a safe place, such as a gym, for them to exercise. "It comes down to the parents, too," he says. "Do they kick you out of the house or do they let you sit all day and play video games?" One way to address this concern is to do activities together as a family, as the Radtkes do.

Most of all, have fun. Van Zyl York recommends that parents encourage participation in sports because they provide exercise and opportunities for interpersonal interaction. A study she did with fifth graders showed that fun is the No. 1 reason kids are active, and they love spending time with their friends and families. Even if your children are not the organized-sport type, they still have options: playing a pick-up game of basketball with dad in the driveway or down the street, walking to the local park with big sister, or inventing their own games with the neighbor kids. ♦

Talking to Your Child about Weight

Broaching the subject of weight with a child who is heavier than what is considered healthy requires very careful conversations that take the focus off of extra pounds. In fact, Pam Van Zyl York, chairwoman of Action for Healthy Kids Minnesota, says that if the focus is on health rather than on weight, the weight problem may take care of itself. Making good nutrition and exercise choices as a family can go a long way, too. Any discussion should be preceded by a close examination of how the entire family uses food and regards exercise.

"We need to pay attention to our environment and how we manage our home food environment," Van Zyl York says. "It is very ineffective to single out one member of the family and expect them to behave differently from the rest of the family. If you've [looked at the family] and it's still a problem, it's time for a talk with the child's family physician."

There's no disputing the fact that body weight matters—even in kids. "Early childhood overweight is a major risk factor for obesity later in life," says William Dietz, MD, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's division of nutrition and physical activity. Dietz cites a study of obese adults that found that half were overweight before age eight.

But how do you determine if your kids are at what's considered a "healthy" weight? In general, Van Zyl York recommends focusing on your child's pattern of growth over time rather than on height and weight at any one point (pediatricians routinely chart patients' height and weight on a growth curve). Talk to your child's pediatrician if you're concerned, but Van Zyl York cautions parents to remember that each child is different. Factors such as ethnicity and family history need to be taken into account. "Children are not all the same shape or size," she says. "Remember that healthy habits in terms of eating well and being active are going to be more important, especially for those who may not be as thin as others."

Dietz recommends approaching any discussion about weight with caution. Children, especially teenagers, usually know they're overweight and may become painfully self-conscious when they are reminded. Girls, in particular, are in danger of becoming preoccupied with their weight and developing eating disorders. Having the child's pediatrician discuss the emotional topic of weight instead is probably the most effective approach, Dietz says. —M. V.



Healthy Foods, Healthy Kids

Eating better makes for healthier, happier families. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Fortunately, it is. Our nutrition experts tell you how to make it happen. By Sara Aase

Supersizing is out. School vending machines are under fire. Even Cookie Monster is cutting back. Lately, so much attention has been focused on the bad food choices targeted at kids—and their corresponding rising rates of obesity—that it's easy to lose sight of what they *should* eat. Yet childhood is the most critical time for their immediate nutritional needs and for establishing lifelong habits.

After the first year of life, adolescence marks the greatest growth spurt. During those critical years, teens gain 50 percent of their adult body weight and build 40 percent of their skeletal mass and the final 20 percent of their adult height. So what, and how much, should your kids be eating? Nutritionists from around the country will help you make sense of our complex food environment and reclaim healthy eating as something to celebrate.

Understand Your Power

Parents have the lion's share of control and influence over what and how their kids eat, even though in a busy household it might feel like just the opposite.

Dining together as a family encourages better eating habits.

Keep the following four cornerstones in mind, says Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, principal investigator of Project EAT and author of a book that summarizes that research, *I'm, Like, So Fat! Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World*:

- Role model healthy behaviors.
- Make it easy to make healthy food choices and be physically active.
- Focus less on weight and more on overall health.
- Provide a supportive environment with lots of talking and even more listening.

Walk the Talk

As we all know, kids really do imitate what they see their parents doing. If you feed them carrots while you nibble cookies, they'll reach for cookies as soon as they're old enough. So bring home healthy food and eat it together as often as possible. But what and how much? Turn to the food pyramid, online at mypyramid.gov, where you can type in your child's age, gender, and activity level to get a customized guide, by food group, with plenty of examples of foods to bring home. It's also available by calling



703-605-4265. The guide even demystifies what constitutes a serving, translating it from ounces into cups and half-cups.

Generally speaking, the guidelines are the same for all of us: Eat mostly whole grains, vegetables, beans, fruits, and nuts; low-fat dairy with some lean meat (poultry and fish); some mono- or polyunsaturated oils; and very small amounts of saturated fat, sweets, and other foods that deliver too many calories and too few nutrients. "Your plate should look like a Chinese meal,"

Neumark-Sztainer says. "With a lot of rice, a lot of vegetables, a little meat, a little fat."

Don't know exactly what a "whole grain" is? The pyramid will explain the difference between grains and tell you how to read labels—just remember, the first ingredient on any label makes up the majority of whatever you're buying.

Eat together to model portion sizes and enjoyment of food, says Neumark-Sztainer. It discourages binge eating, encourages important social

skills, and enhances family togetherness and a sense of well-being. Even if teens seem to resist family meals or go through junk food binges, the foundation you build now will stay with them.

Make It Easy

Kids will eat what's in front of them, especially when they're hungry, so make the good stuff more accessible than the junk. (You just may find that this trick works for you, too.) That means cutting up fruits and vegetables and leaving them on a counter after school or in plain sight in the fridge. Too busy to chop? Buy the pre-cut veggies and fruit platters. Some even come with dip.

"In my house, if there was a melon sitting on the table, it would rot before the kids would cut it up," says Mary Story, a professor in the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health. "But if I cut it up and put it in a bowl, it would disappear." Also stock up on yogurt, bananas, apples, bottled orange juice, breakfast bars, tortillas and cheese, popcorn, pretzels, hummus, dried peas, and veggie burgers.

Making it easier to eat healthfully also means limiting the amount of

Why Eating Together Makes a Difference

Turns out there really is something to that old parent mantra, "Just try it!" Children who dine with family at least four times a week eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and calcium-rich foods, eat fewer fried foods, and drink less soda than children who don't, according to a study by University of Minnesota researchers. Why? Parents decide what to serve, and everyone eating the same food together is a powerful reinforcer of good habits.

"One of the strongest and most important factors that influence children's diets is what parents eat," says Mary Story, co-investigator for Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), a dietary survey of more than 4,000 Minnesota teens. "If we really want kids to eat healthy, this has to be a family affair."

The benefits of eating together go far beyond physical health. Story and her colleagues also found that teens who ate seven or more weekly meals with their families had higher grades, were less depressed, and were less likely to drink, smoke, or use marijuana than kids who ate with their families less than twice a week.

"It's not just about food but also about having that time together," says Barbara Carlson, co-founder and president of a Minneapolis suburban community organization called Putting Family First and co-author of a book of the same title. "It's a check-in time to share the highs and lows of the day, debate, discuss, share ideas, ideals, and values. And to laugh together!" —S. A.

4 Healthy Snacks

Fruit kabobs

For an easy way to make eating fresh fruit more fun, make a fruit skewer to dip into yogurt or fruit dip. There are no sugar or additives, but this treat is still sweet.

Carrot sticks with peanut butter

We've all eaten ants on a log (celery, peanut butter, and raisins), but this carrot version is a creative variation that kids will love just as much.

Frozen grapes

Here's a fun snack that's packed with antioxidants—and it cools, reenergizes, and replenishes kids who are tired from a long day (hopefully filled with activity).

Seasoned popcorn

Naturally low in fat, air-popped popcorn—flavored with seasoning salt instead of butter—keeps all the taste but loses the fat.

...And a Few to Avoid

Carbonated beverages

Sodas are filled with sugar, preservatives, and caffeine, all of which cause dehydration.

Manufactured baked goods

Baked goods are manufactured to have a long shelf life and are full of additives, artificial flavors, and preservatives. Children do not get useful nutrients or energy reserves from this type of snack.

Candy bars

Candy bars are good for the immediate energy boost from sugar but don't help the body replenish nutrients and energy already expended, which leaves the body wanting more. Try a carob chocolate granola bar instead.

—Dina Eddings



sweets, chips, or soda you bring home—especially soda pop, nutritionists say. It offers nothing but empty sugary calories—250 in a twenty-ounce bottle—without providing any nutrients, yet it replaces milk as a choice for many kids.

Don't ban foods, and don't use them as rewards. Bring treats home in moderation, and in small portions if possible, such as ice cream sandwiches. And show that it's OK to eat them in small amounts and enjoy them. "Eat a piece of cake and enjoy it. Don't feel guilty about it," Neumark-Sztainer says. Studies show that forbidding foods backfires, and that kids eat more of it when parents aren't around, which can lead to binge eating and other negative food behaviors that can last throughout adulthood.

Do discuss portion sizes and food messages with kids. It will equip them to make better food choices on their own and will also help you realize which messages push your buttons.

Focus on Good Habits

If family members are overweight, focus instead on healthful eating and exercise. "Teens or children who hear a lot of comments about weight feel badly about themselves and are more likely to engage in unhealthy diet behaviors," Neumark-Sztainer says. If your teen tells you she thinks she needs to lose weight, encourage her instead to focus on what she's eating and her level of physical activity, and to let her body do the rest. "Talk about how they ate fruit for dessert and what a good decision that was rather than weight," Neumark-Sztainer says.

Establish a no-weight-teasing policy at home. "Forty-eight of fifty teens we interviewed had experienced some type of weight teasing," Neumark-Sztainer says. "It's usually not

intended to hurt, but it can be very hurtful. Homes are supposed to be safe places for them." If your child is getting teased outside the home, be prepared to offer extra time and emotional support.

No Extremes Necessary

Dietary habits aren't learned—or unlearned—all at once. So make changes gradually. "Changes are hard," Neumark-Sztainer says. "It's very important to take small steps." These tips might include:

- Increase fruits and vegetables.
- Switch to low-fat dairy products.
- Eliminate soda.
- Decrease portion sizes.
- Increase whole-wheat consumption.
- Eat regular meals and meals as a family as often as possible.
- Enjoy your food.

Pick one thing at a time to work on. For instance, if you're not eating any meals together, "don't say we're

“Bring treats home in moderation. It's OK to eat them in small amounts and enjoy them.”

going to eat together five times a week," Neumark-Sztainer says. "Pick one night. If you're drinking a lot of soda, switch to juice first. Don't switch to water right away." Strive for healthful, balanced meals as often as possible, but don't expect perfection. "It's about finding what works for you," Neumark-Sztainer says. "You can make some compromises—it doesn't have to be all or nothing." ♦

What to Look for in a Nutritional Label

There's more to the nutritional label than meets the eye. Here's a translation.

Nutrition Facts

Look closely at the serving size, particularly how many servings there are in one package. This will help you determine how many servings (and calories from fat) you're consuming.

Percentages based on a daily 2,000-calorie diet.

Serving Size 1 Package (283 g)

Servings Per Container 1

Amount Per Serving

Calories 290 Calories from Fat 25

Do not exceed 30 percent of your daily calories from fat.

% Daily Value

Total Fat 2.5 g 4%

Saturated Fat .5 g 3%

Trans Fat 0 g

Cholesterol 25 mg 7%

Sodium 680mg 29%

Total Carbohydrate 52 g 17%

Limit these nutrients. Eating too much fat, cholesterol, and sodium may contribute to risks for heart disease, some cancers, and high blood pressure. Limiting these elements now gives your child a head start for a healthy life ahead of him or her.

Get enough of these nutrients. Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods for their low-fat, high-vitamin, and high-fiber content, as these may reduce your family's risk of heart disease. When it comes to protein, be sure you get it from lean meats like fish and poultry.

Sugars 20 g

Dietary Fiber 1 g 4%

Protein 14 g

Vitamin A 30% • Vitamin C 10%

Calcium 2% • Iron 2%

The amount of sugar listed includes both natural sugars (such as those that occur in fruits and dairy products) as well as sugars added during processing. As a general rule, keep sugars to less than 10 grams per serving.

What We Eat at Our House

Lalah Lewis has the typical tastes of an eight-year-old. The Atlanta student's favorite foods are a McDonald's hamburger and fries, something she orders once a week on treat day. Tolerated vegetables include green beans, lettuce with French dressing, creamed corn, and English peas. Lalah is also typical in that she's among the 30 percent of kids who are now overweight or at risk for becoming overweight.

Phyllis Lewis, Lalah's grandmother and guardian, says diet-related diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease run in her family, so she works very hard to make sure Lalah eats well and exercises. "I was heavy as a child and no one did anything about it," Lewis says. "I don't want her having to worry about this all her life."

Lewis makes Lalah a vegetable-rich "green drink" every morning from a health-food powder or from scratch, using kale, celery, carrots, parsley, garlic, and ginger. During the summer, Lalah also drinks a fruit-laden smoothie. Lewis says she and Lalah learned more good advice from a six-

week dietary program called Fit Kids, offered by Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, to which Lalah's doctor referred her. "They don't recommend you have a big fight or force your children to eat vegetables," Lewis says. "Have it on the table, and if they don't eat the vegetables today, maybe they'll eat them in ten years. That was one of the big eye openers for me."

Lalah's efforts are frequently sabotaged during the school year by pizza parties, birthday treats, and adults who insist on rewarding children with sweets. Lewis tries to help Lalah pick and choose but understands that the line is a fine one. Studies show that forbidding children to have certain foods or trying to curtail their intake of them backfires. Those children eat more of the tempting junk food when parents aren't around. Lewis takes the long view. "I will let her enjoy parties," Lewis says. "That may cause a little increase in weight, and then when there's nothing going on I reel her back in. I think as she gets older she'll want to eat healthy. The seeds are being planted." —S. A.



No matter how you do it, take a lesson from these kids at a Minneapolis park—movement should be fun.

Get Moving!

If you suspect that your family isn't active enough, you're probably right. The good news is that it's easy—and a whole lot of fun—for you and your kids to start moving together. By Shawn Sweeney ■ Photography by Craig Bares

Think about your average summer as a full-time kid: Wearing the treads bald on your bike—after all, that was the only transportation for many. Pick-up kickball games where “ghost runners” were activated. Endless days in the water amphibiously propelling yourself just because you wanted to. And who can forget the competitive and usually spontaneous foot race to the corner? Miraculously, these activities somehow all happened between dance recitals and little league games.

But whatever it was you did as a kid, chances are you never really thought of it as “exercise.” And you probably never dreamed there would one day be headlines about kids and lack of exercise.

Here's the good news. Beyond blaming video games, satellite TV, Oreos, and everything in between, there are lots of things parents can do constructively (and creatively) to get kids back on track—provided first that they are good role models themselves. Plus, there are some tricks to help children remember that these activities are just plain fun.

Parents Are the Example

“Parents need to model good behavior—show kids that activity is an important

part of their own lives, and kids will follow suit,” says Kathryn Schmitz, an associate professor in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota.

Most of us understand that we all are individuals with different bodies and needs. There’s not a magic formula for how much exercise is enough for a particular child. Schmitz equates it to how doctors determine the dose of a prescription drug: “When you take prescription medication, you take the dose necessary for a particular effect. Exercise is the same—effects differ by dose,” she says. “One hour of vigorous, intense activity is recommended for the average child or adolescent.”

These sixty minutes of activity should be accumulated throughout the day in segments, according to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. This can be a quick game of tag, a dance party, a jump-rope contest—whatever is going to get your kids moving.

Even though your intentions as a parent may be the best, pushing your child to do any sort of activity may backfire. “Parents need to understand that they cannot force a child to exercise,” says Beth Passehl, Fit Kids Program Coordinator at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. The Fit Kids program helps overweight kids and their families with the tools necessary to balance exercise and diet. “All



parents can do is help the child learn to be responsible for their own bodies and to take good care of themselves because they can and want to,” Passehl says.

The Mental-Health Benefits

While the physical benefits of exercise are obvious, the advantages of activity extend to the realm of mental and emotional well-being as well.

Exercise has been linked with a variety of psychological benefits, including decreased depression and anxiety, improved mood states and self-confi-

dence, and an increased sense of overall quality of life, according to the National Mental Health Association. Studies dating back to 1995 have confirmed these links, says Leslie Lydle, professor in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota. “While there’s been this general feeling that [exercise and mental well-being] are related, there is mounting evidence through empirical research,” she says.

Higher levels of activity in children are shown to lower rates of delinquent behavior and boost academic performance, according to the NMHA. This relationship between physical activity and academic achievement is another topic of interest for Lydle and her colleagues. “We believe that kids who are not active during the day probably are having problems concentrating in school, which is leading to lower achievement,” Lydle says. “And of course that can trigger a whole set of stressors for kids.”

Fun for All Seasons

Depending on what part of the country you live in, seasons may dictate what activities are feasible—and fun—for kids. Here are some suggestions that cover the country.

Winter

Ice skating and hockey at the local park, sledding, snowball fights, and the construction of snow forts and snowmen all are great conventions of winter. Here’s a hint to warm up you and your kids: Escape to an indoor water park or take a stroll through a local museum to shake the winter doldrums and get the blood flowing.

Summer

Need a cure for the summertime heat? The obvious choice is to dive toward the pool or beach. But if you want to stick closer to home, familyfun.go.com offers some great ideas for right in your own backyard. One game is Musical Sprinklers, a chairless version of the childhood favorite. Kids dance in a circle around a sprinkler that’s shut off. When the sprinkler comes on, everyone must freeze. And one or two are instantly cooled off!

The “In Between” Seasons

Wherever you live, there are bound to be weather restraints that could hinder physical activity. If a visit to the health club or chance to be outside are not options, reintroduce timeless games such as Twister, Nerf basketball, or even the construction of a couch fort out of cushions and blankets. —S. S.



Raising Healthy Kids

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Fun: The Name of the Game

Health clubs offer just about everything needed to transform the human body from the consummate “before” to “after.” While some parents look to their workout at the club as “me time,” others take advantage of fitness clubs that make it all about the kids.

At their foundation, YMCA and YWCA are all about kindness, diversi-

ty, benevolence, and now, forward thinking. One YMCA chapter advertises multicolored fliers on cork bulletin boards with headlines that read, “Kid’s Exercise Night” and “Kid’s Yoga.” That’s right: Kid’s Yoga.

“We have far more success with programs that are about having fun,” says Mel Jessee, YMCA fitness director at the Northwest branch in New

Hope, Minnesota. “‘Teens in Training’ is a program that constantly has a waiting list. [This program] makes all the fitness machines available to twelve-to-fourteen-year-olds in a fun, supervised atmosphere.” The organization always looks to find out what is “cool” for a particular age group when it comes to exercise. For example, this chapter’s “Funk” program brings together exercise and hip-hop for teens and young adults. “We know from experience that the word ‘exercise’ drives them away, so we don’t say it at all in the program title,” Jessee says.

What I Do for Fun



PHOTOGRAPHY © PETER BECK

Natalie Beck
Minneapolis, Minnesota
College freshman

“Throughout high school, I played organized sports, which I participated in primarily for the fun of the game and being part of a team. Right now, exercise is a big part of my mental health. In the craziness of [my] senior year, exercise was a necessary outlet between homework and the major life decisions I was making.

Dancing is my passion and dance is my decided college major, so any opportunity at outdoor activities such as inline skating or biking with friends makes my day. My advice for someone who has a hard time staying on track with exercise would be to find one activity you love or you and your friends love. Then stick to it and find a way to make it a fun part of your week.”



Marvin Bradford
Champlin, Minnesota
9th grade

“I love playing basketball [and] at the park after school or playing HORSE at my friend’s house. I take tae kwon do class because it’s fun and I get to be with my friends in the classes. I really like the discipline of stretching, warming up, running, and then getting to spar. When I’m done, I’m definitely sweating, and I know I got a good workout. I have video games like all my

friends, but I’d rather play outside with friends than play video games or watch TV all day.”



Joey Herzog
Bloomington, Minnesota
5th grade

“I love playing soccer and basketball at school. I also like to scooter or bike to my friend’s house to jump on the trampoline or meet at the park. Me and my friends made a game up called ‘Lava Tag.’ It’s a game we play on the park’s jungle gym. You get your friends together, and if you’re ‘it,’ you have unlimited steps on the sand and three steps once you get on the jungle gym [to

go after someone]. Then the ‘not its’ have unlimited steps on the jungle gym, but they can’t touch the sand. It’s a lot of fun!”



“They forget about it and just have fun.” Throughout the United States, more and more fitness facilities are encouraging parents and their children to join aerobics, Pilates, or aquatics classes together.

While belonging to a health club is a nice perk, you don’t need it to encourage activity among children. Simple things—taking the pet for a walk, running through the sprinkler, raking a pile of leaves to jump into—will make a world of difference for your family’s health. And remember, exercise can be more fun when a friend or family member shares it with you. “Physical activity is likely to be continued if folks enjoy it, have someone to support them in the activity, and join them in maintaining changes,” Passehl says. ♦



Assistant principal Bryan Bass was a key player in adding water vending machines at North High in Minneapolis.

Schools Smarten Up

A look at how schools are encouraging their students to eat better and move more—and what you as a parent can do to help. By Amy Barrett ■ Photography By Craig Bares

By placing soda machines outside gymnasiums, rewarding academic achievement with candy, and allowing French fries to pass for a vegetable serving in the cafeteria, schools have been sending students mixed messages about nutrition for years.

In response to growing concern about childhood obesity—and a virtual alphabet soup of organizations from the CDC to the NEA weighing in on what to do about it—schools throughout the country have stepped up their efforts to promote healthy eating and exercise habits.

Schools of Change

North High in Minneapolis, for example, did away with all but one of its soda-only machines prior to the start of the 2001–02 school year. To promote healthier alternatives, the school increased the number of beverage vending machines from four to sixteen total: two machines with sports drinks, thirteen with bottled water and 100 percent fruit and vegetable juice, and one with soda. As an incentive to drink water, North allowed it in classrooms and priced the water competitively at 75 cents a bottle, compared with \$1.25 for soda.

Assistant Principal Bryan Bass championed the changes with North High administrators because they were fed up with the number of unhealthy choices surrounding students. But here's the catch: North relies on the profits from vending

Raising Healthy Kids

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machine sales to offset the cost of Advanced Placement exams, field trips, and enrichment programs. Fortunately, since pulling the plug on the soda machines, North's profits from beverage sales have actually increased.

Not only that, "our rate of suspension was also reduced by 20 percent over two years," Bass reports. "Was it just because of the vending machines? Maybe not. It also had to do with good leadership. But it didn't hurt to get rid of the sugar and caffeine."

Meanwhile, Hopkins High School in the Twin Cities has been serving up whole-wheat cinnamon rolls and organic yogurts for breakfast along with premium deli meats and other fresh and natural sandwich fixings for lunch at the Health Nut Café, which opened in 2003.

The Health Nut Café is one component of an effort to improve nutrition and physical activity throughout the Hopkins school district. The effort began about three years ago with the formation of a Healthy School Environment Committee, including teachers, principals, and parents, as well as representatives from the Hennepin County Community Health Department and the Minnesota Department of Health.

"We looked around and asked ourselves, 'Does our environment support our curriculum?'" says Bonnie Young Johnson, director of the Healthy School Environment Initiative for the Hopkins school district. "We didn't want students to go out the door of their classroom and not have healthy choices or opportunities to get much exercise."

With a goal of having some kind of health program in place at every school by the end of 2005, Johnson and her colleagues started applying for grants. Eisenhower Elementary School, for one, got \$1,000 from the Midwest Dairy Council to promote milk consumption. Several schools also got money for pedometers and started walking clubs. The Community Education staff even opened a cooking school, where parents and children can learn how to prepare healthy home-cooked meals.

“ Ask your kids what they're eating (and when) for meals and snacks at school. ”

Although schools can't tackle childhood obesity alone, school-based health initiatives like these play a key role because of the amount of time students spend at school—roughly six hours a day, five days a week, thirty-five weeks a year for thirteen years, not counting extended-day programs and summer school.

What You Can Do

Families, too, can do plenty to improve health and fitness at their child's school. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **Get to know your school.** Ask what foods are available at school, not only from the hot-lunch menu, but also in a la carte lines, vending machines, and classrooms. Are students active every day? Are there policies on physical activity and nutrition?
- **Talk with the P.E. teachers.** Take the initiative to speak with physical education teachers who are shaping children's lives as much as any other teachers. Find out what your P.E. teachers need to support them in getting more P.E. time in school. In addition, attend PTO meetings, write letters to the editor, and contact your congressional representative.

- **Get involved.** If your school doesn't already have a health advisory committee, start one. This committee can generate ideas for ensuring a healthy environment at school. "You need a group of people," says Johnson, adding that it helps if some of them are upper-level administrators. "A passionate individual can't do it alone."
- **Start small.** Study programs that have been successful at other schools, but be realistic about the time and money needed to implement them at yours.
- **Involve your kids.** Don't assume they'll be opposed to change. When Bass shared his idea for replacing soda machines with the student leadership group at North, they said, "It's about time!"
- **Rethink birthday treats.** When it's your child's birthday, send bookmarks, stickers, pencils, or healthy snacks to the classroom with them instead of sweet treats. "You don't want to deprive your kids of the party atmosphere," Johnson says, "but you can do fun things without being into fats and sugars."
- **Brown-bag it.** If you don't like the choices available for hot lunch, send food from home.
By reinforcing proper nutrition and exercise as much as possible, schools can help students reduce their odds of health problems later in life. "Some folks are afraid to take the risk," says Bass, whose colleagues have nicknamed him Tofu, "but it's a responsible risk. You're talking about the health and well-being of the future." ♦

Medtronic Announces New Grants

Want to make a difference in your school? The Medtronic Foundation is offering one-time Fitness And Nutrition (FAN) grants up to \$5,000 to schools in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. FAN grants recognize exemplary school fitness and nutrition programs and encourage new and innovative ways to promote physical activity and good nutrition before, during, and after school. Priority is given to schools that serve socio-economically disadvantaged students. For more information or to apply, log on to medtronic.com/foundation. The application deadline is December 15, 2005.

For More Information

Where to find the latest information about raising healthy kids.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BARES

Action for Healthy Kids

actionforhealthykids.org

800-416-5136

Nonprofit that focuses its efforts on healthy changes at schools. Also provides state-by-state initiatives.

American Dietetic Association

eatright.org/public

800-877-1600

Offers nutrition, health, and well-being information plus tips of the day and an online dietetics manual.

Be Active Minnesota

beactiveminnesota.org

Provides tips for getting started with physical education, finding the right activity, and sticking with it.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

770-488-5820 or 404-679-7924

Provides a wide array of information and tips on nutrition, physical activity, and obesity.

Center for Science in the Public Interest

cspinet.org

202-332-9110

Covers a wide array of health issues from nutrition to alcohol intake. Includes a link to smartmouth.com, a kid-oriented nutrition website.

Dietary Guidelines

healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines

877-696-6775

Provides a link to the government's comprehensive 2005 guidelines on good dietary habits.

New Food Pyramid

mypyramid.gov

703-605-4265

Tips on making the pyramid work for

you plus a new interactive tool to customize the guide based on age, sex, and activity level.

School Nutrition Association

asfsa.org

703-739-3900

Information for parents on child nutrition ranging from details of foodservice operations to kid-friendly recipes.

Shape Up America!

shapeup.org

Information about physical activity and weight management as components of children's health. Also includes ninety-nine tips for family fitness fun.

USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion

usda.gov/cnpp

Links to the food pyramid and information on various dietary guidelines, including a version specifically for younger children.

VERB

www.cdc.gov/youthcampaign/

770-488-6480

A national, multicultural, social marketing campaign coordinated by the CDC to encourage young people ages nine to thirteen (tweens) to be physically active every day. See also: verbparents.com and verbnow.com

WIC

www.fns.usda.gov/wic

800-942-4030 (Minnesota)

Website with information on the program designed for low-income women, infants, and children, including information on how to apply for the program.