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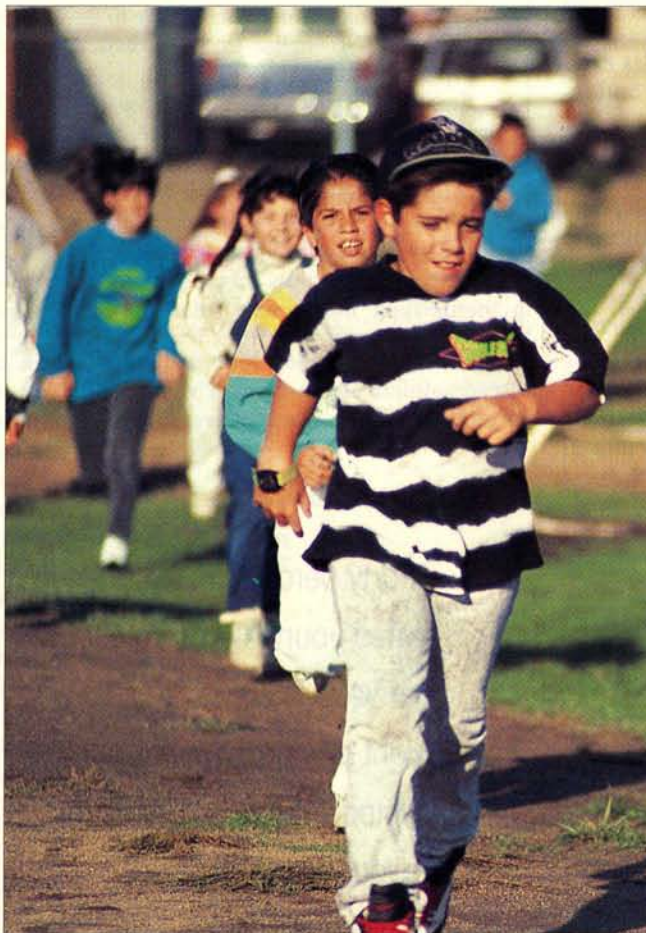
ON SOUND MINDS AND BODIES



YOUTH FITNESS

HOW HEALTHY ARE OUR CHILDREN?

BY MATT BRZYCKI



Can your eight-year-old girl do thirty sit-ups? Can your nine-year-old boy do five pull-ups? If it's any consolation, you and your kids aren't alone. Numerous recent studies support the unfortunate fact that our youngsters are in relatively poor physical condition.

In the 1950s, the subject of youth fitness became a national concern. This anxiety was heightened when, in December 1953, a fifteen-year-long research project by Dr. Hans Kraus and Dr. Sonja Weber revealed that US youngsters were much less fit than their European counterparts. In response to these much-publicized findings, President Eisenhower formed a Council on Youth Fitness, the forerunner of the current President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. Near the end of 1960, President John F. Kennedy described the results of the Kraus-Weber Tests as "the most startling demonstration of the general physical decline of American youth." The Kraus-Weber Tests spawned scores of subsequent research studies that substantiated the same

basic conclusions: American youths are out of shape and overweight.

The situation has not improved much in the last forty years. A recent report by the federal Department of Health and Human Services found that children born in the 1980s are less fit than were children of the 1960s. In addition, a national survey of 12,000 youths between six and seventeen found that fewer children today meet minimum standards for cardio-

vascular fitness, flexibility, and abdominal and upper body strength than did a comparable group in 1981. Other national surveys show that at least half of all American school children don't get enough exercise, and that up to 20 million young people are overweight.

Indeed, the number of studies, tests and surveys that note poor fitness levels among American children seems endless. Perhaps the most frightening finding comes from the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. Their recent study showed that 40 percent of tested youngsters between the ages of five and eight are already afflicted with at least one of the four risk factors associated with heart disease. In other words, more than a third of our kids suffer from obesity, high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, or inactivity.

Just how important is it that kids participate in regular physical activities? Children (and adults) who exercise consistently obtain predictable, measurable physical benefits. Kids especially benefit because regular exercise facilitates the

PHOTO BY GLORIA WINTZ-GRASSADONIA

development of bones and muscle tissue. While vigorous activity develops a wide range of motor skills, it also helps youngsters maintain proper bodyweight and a desirable level of body fat. And children who are physically fit can perform daily activities without undue fatigue. Most importantly, regular physical activity boosts a child's resistance to illness, especially to coronary heart disease.

There are notable mental and psychological benefits as well. Regular physical exercise improves a child's self-discipline, self-confidence, and self-esteem during the critical 'identity-forming' years. Research demonstrates that physically active children are less prone to emotional disturbances and are generally more outgoing and optimistic; youngsters use physical activity as an outlet to release tension and stress. Finally, regular exercise increases a child's alertness and interest in learning.

Unfortunately, the fitness boom of the seventies and eighties, which created a widespread appreciation of physical well-being among adults, has not filtered down to children. Why not?

First of all, fitness testing isn't nearly as common these days. Testing was routine for the children of the sixties—the same children who reached adulthood in the fitness boom era. Another reason is rooted in the technological and cultural changes that have occurred over the past two decades.

Today's youngsters, mesmerized by the ubiquitous television set are further tempted by video games. Quite simply, too many children are watchers instead of doers.

To this sedentary foundation, add a host of everyday activities and tasks that demand less energy and time than they did in the past. Remember how you used to get from your house to your friend's house? More than likely, today's youngsters will be transported in the family station wagon—walking and biking as transportation modes have gone the way of the horse and buggy. Ironically, automation has provided young people with even more leisure time; unfortunately, too often, it simply affords more time for TV and Nintendo games.

In many parts of the country, school physical education programs are being closely scrutinized. The biggest criticism is that too much emphasis is placed on competition and team sports which cater

A BASIC PE PROGRAM

Physical Education (PE) classes

need to change their traditional emphasis on competitive sports and stress lifelong sports activities along with the recreational aspects of exercise.

Several organizations, including the American Academy of Family Physicians, recommend that students undergo fitness testing twice a year. Fitness testing in PE classes establishes a baseline measurement of fitness levels, providing a way to monitor improvements in both kids and programs. Furthermore, tests identify youngsters with substandard levels of fitness so they can be given the extra attention they need while their bodies are most susceptible to the tonic effects of controlled (and if necessary, therapeutic) exercise.

Generally, PE courses need to promote balanced participation in the following three areas.

MUSCULAR STRENGTH

Although resistance training exercise is the most effective way to increase strength, such activities are usually inappropriate for children under thirteen. For pre-teens, calisthenic-type movements that involve

bodyweight as resistance (such as push-

ups and sit-ups) are effective strength building routines. When adolescents perform resistance exercise, they need to be protected so as not to overstress still-forming bones and joints. Resistance exercises should be performed two or three times per week on non-consecutive days, and should involve all the major muscle groups.

STRETCHING

These exercises should be incorporated into a daily routine to maintain or improve flexibility. Once again, these exercises should be performed so as to tone all the major muscle groups. The stretches should be held for about thirty seconds.

CARDIORESPIRATORY FITNESS

This is best developed by activities that are continuous in nature and involve relatively large amounts of muscle mass. Running, swimming, cycling, skating, hiking and rowing are a few excellent examples. These aerobic activities should be performed three or more times per week for twenty to thirty minutes.

primarily to the needs of children that are already athletically inclined. Thus many programs slight the needs of average stu-

“Forty percent of tested youngsters between five and eight are already afflicted with one of the four risk factors associated with heart disease.”

dents. There's no denying that competitive sports nurtures such admirable qualities as teamwork, discipline, self-esteem, and sportsmanship. Neverthe-

less, many feel that physical education classes generally do not promote healthy fitness habits, or stress lifelong recreational activities for the rest of the kids.

There are steps—from the local level to the national one—that we can take to correct the seemingly abysmal levels of fitness among American youth. At the federal level, in January 1990, George Bush named Arnold Schwarzenegger the new director of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. Whether the former bodybuilding champion can significantly influence the direction of youth fitness in this country remains to be seen. However, Schwarzenegger has made it perfectly clear that he takes his new role very seriously, and that he will target the bulk of his efforts in the direction of enhanced physical fitness for the young and the old.

Narrowing our focus, what can we do in our own communities? To begin with, we need to be more vocal about the quality of our schools' physical education programs. Physical Education courses should be regularly scheduled, properly staffed, and required for all students in all grades. (The American College of Sports

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Medicine recommends twenty to thirty minutes of daily exercise for every student.) Classes should be architected in such a way that our children develop an understanding of and an appreciation for physical fitness. To set up a lifetime of health, children need to see that fitness is a kind of play—that it's fun.

And finally what can we do in our own homes? Parents need to understand that changing the direction of youth fitness is ultimately their responsibility. The National Children and Youth Fitness Study revealed that, on average, parents exercise with their children less than one day a week. The study also showed that children who had physically active parents—especially parents who exercised with their

children—tended to be leaner than children whose parents were less active. Parents need to look at their children's activity patterns. How much time is spent in after-school sports, both organized and other-

wise? How much time is spent in passive or sedentary activities? What is an appropriate mix? can you come up with ways to motivate and inspire your child to participate in more physically active pastimes? And are there ways to model behavior that reflect your commitment to healthy activity that you find fun, satisfying, and beneficial?

The message is clear: positive changes in youth fitness won't happen magically. But if families, schools and

communities band together, we can take a healthy stride in the direction of lifelong fitness habits for our children. We have so little to lose and so much to gain. ☺

“Parents need to understand that changing the direction of youth fitness is ultimately their responsibility.”

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