

School-Based Curriculum Helps Students Get *Ready, Set, FIT!*



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School Nurses and classroom teachers are on the frontline when it comes to helping children develop healthy behaviors that carry over into adulthood. The time for intervention is now, as the consequences of childhood overweight and obesity are making their mark on classroom learning.

Physical activity and nutrition have a direct impact on academic achievement in math, reading, and writing. Inactive children with nutrient-poor diets score lower on standardized achievement tests than children who eat well and are physically active (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2006). New research also links overweight to lower academic achievement (Kang & Joung, 2007).

Overweight and obesity result in a host of medical conditions, including asthma, heart disease, and diabetes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Many overweight children also have sleep apnea, which has been linked to attention-deficit disorder, behavior problems, and poor academic performance (Chan, Edman, & Koltai, 2004).

Overweight children have a higher rate of tardiness and absenteeism than normal-weight children (Shore et al., 2008). In many instances, what is keeping these children from attending school is social stigma and bullying (University of Pennsylvania, 2007).

In April 2006, the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools at George Washington University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation convened a group of experts to talk about child overweight and the potential for School Nurses and school-based health centers to intervene. The experts — School Nurses, administrators, and representatives of professional organizations that focus on school health issues — concluded that a focus on prevention is the best strategy to combat the problem and recommended that guidance on eating and exercise be part of health education programs for all students (Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, 2006).

Ready, Set, FIT!

The American Academy of Family Physicians' fitness initiative, *Americans in Motion*, teamed with Scholastic, the world's largest publisher and distributor of

children's books, to create *Ready, Set, FIT!*, a fitness curriculum for 3rd- and 4th-grade classrooms. *Ready, Set, FIT!*, which defines fitness as physical activity, nutrition, and emotional well-being, teaches language arts and math skills while communicating important health messages.

Ready, Set, FIT! is endorsed by the National School Boards Association and is aligned with national standards for 3rd and 4th grade. The program's in-class and at-home activities educate students and their families about the everyday choices they can make to be healthy. Program materials include:

- A teaching guide with four fitness lesson plans,
 - Your Choices Add Up to Fitness
 - Get Moving
 - Choose Smart! Eat Smart!
 - Express Yourself!
- Reproducible worksheets,
- Educational posters for the classroom, and
- Student guides with at-home activities for the whole family.

Kim Neal, RN, BSN, School Nurse supervisor for the Raymore-Peculiar

School District in Missouri, believes that the family activities are key. "In 3rd and 4th grade, kids are still under the thumb of parents who decide what they eat and what physical activities they're involved in." For changes to be implemented and sustained, she says, parents have to be educated, too.

Neal suggests a pep assembly as a way to kick off the curriculum. "This will get the kids excited and talking about the program at home. Then when the activities come home, parents may be more likely to follow through." The program's take-home activities promote family conversations about fitness choices.

Teachers or School Nurses are encouraged to invite a family physician into the classroom to help teach the first lesson. The physician reinforces the importance of all three areas of fitness — physical activity, nutrition, and emotional well-being — and helps kids understand how their family doctor can help. "Family physicians are in a unique position to have a real impact on the health of entire families," explains Michelle May, MD, a family physician in Arizona. "We see patients throughout their lives, from infancy

through old age. We want children and their families to feel comfortable talking to us about fitness so we can help them live healthier lives."

Classrooms that complete all four lessons can submit their results online and receive a pair of Thorlo exercise socks for the instructor, "Fitness Rules" awareness bands for each student, and a classroom certificate. School Nurses and/or classroom teachers can sign up for the program online at www.readysetfit.org. ■

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