

CLASSROOM



connection

Encouraging a healthy lifestyle

We are routinely reminded that teens need a healthy diet, regular exercise, and plenty of rest for proper physical and mental development. Despite these recommendations, many adolescents aren't getting all they need to be their very best. A few simple changes in lifestyle can pay big dividends in short-term and long-term health, personal image, and school performance.

Growing problem

The National Center for Health Statistics, reports that nearly one in five adolescents is considered obese, up from one in 25 in 1974. In addition, one in three teens is overweight and 90 percent of overweight youth have at least one avoidable risk factor for heart disease such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Those same children are more susceptible to other ailments such as liver disease, diabetes, joint problems, and even gallstones.

It is easy to blame low-cost, high-calorie foods for the rise in obesity. A fast food meal of a deluxe burger, medium fries, and medium soft drink contains more than 1,000 calories and more than 65 percent of the recommended daily allowance of fat. But, burger chains are not the sole cause of the problem.

Families with overcommitted schedules can find it hard to sit down for a balanced, nutritious meal. Picky eaters can refuse what is good for them and hold out for their favorite junk foods. Even income can limit a family's ability to include the more expensive fresh fruits and vegetables in daily meals.

Nutrition is not limited to calories and fat. Meals that are high in sugars and carbohydrates can produce energy peaks and

valleys. Students who fall asleep after dinner could be simply crashing after a sugar high.

Further compounding the problem is that today's adolescents often lack physical exercise. After seven hours sitting in school, many kids return home to additional homework, and then unwind watching television or playing video and computer games. Physical activity burns calories and improves energy levels giving kids the boost they may need to plow through the evening's homework. Without exercise, kids are prone to weight and disease problems.

What schools are doing

Schools recognize the need to help improve students' lifestyles. All schools have a wellness policy that helps guide classroom and physical education activities, school breakfast and lunch menus, and the availability of snack foods in school. The policy may also address issues such as food allergies or foods for classroom and school functions.

New York State is currently placing a greater emphasis on physical education in schools. New efforts encourage kids to actively participate, not simply show up for gym class. Many schools are participating in the state Department of Health's body mass index study in which schools provide anonymous height and weight information for specific age groups. The data does not identify individual students; it simply provides group

data. The results will help schools determine which nutrition/physical education programs might best meet the needs of students.

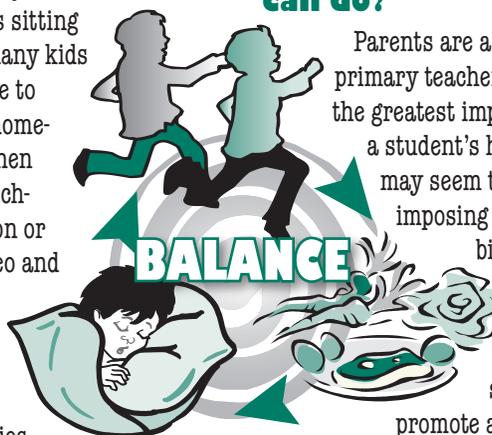
What parents can do?

Parents are a child's primary teacher and have the greatest impact on a student's health. It may seem to be an imposing responsibility, but consider taking a few basic steps to promote a healthy lifestyle.

- **Provide a balanced diet**—Include your kids in planning a menu of nutritious meals. Take them to the grocery store to shop for healthy food choices. Have them help with meal preparation. Involving your children in family meals can reinforce the healthy messages they receive in school.
- **Encourage exercise**—Adolescents need physical activity. If

they aren't playing a sport or physical class such as dance or self-defense, encourage them to take a walk or shoot baskets in the driveway or any other healthy physical activity. Exercising 30 minutes each day can have a positive impact. As Nike encourages, "Just do it!"

- **Limit electronics**—Minutes can quickly drift into hours when a child is on the computer, playing a video game, or watching television. If need be, declare a 30-minute timeout from electronics to make time for physical exercise.
- **Sufficient rest**—Research indicates that teens need an average of nine hours of sleep each night. Most kids barely get seven. If schedules get too full to allow a good night's rest, sit down with your child and help him or her make decisions to lessen their obligations.
- **Model healthy behavior**—This is one place where "do as I say, not as I do," simply doesn't work. And truthfully, parents, like their children, benefit from good nutrition, exercise, and rest.



Weight & self-esteem

The adolescent years can be difficult for children. Changing bodies and relationships can leave them confused and searching. Combine this with our society's fascination with being thin and it can spell disaster for your child. Those who don't measure up can suffer from poor self-image or be driven to extreme eating disorders. In either case, the results can be physically and emotionally destructive. Lessen serious problems by considering the following:

- **Objectively look at your child**—Barely one third of the parents of overweight children recognize the fact. Ignoring weight issues does little to help your child.
- **Encourage your child**—Scolding, diets, and tough love seldom help in these sensitive years. Focus on making family-wide changes that promote a healthy lifestyle. Don't single out your child.
- **Focus on fit**—Genetics determine body type; not every girl is physically programmed to be a runway model. Instead help your child see that being healthy is far more important than meeting some "ideal" physique.

South Colonie curriculum helps **combat childhood obesity**

To help combat childhood obesity, South Colonie Schools has had a comprehensive K-12 wellness and obesity curriculum in place for many years. The curriculum provides ways to help students and families increase their level of exercise and make better food choices throughout their lives.

Educational activities over the years have included "Real Fruit Fridays," where everyone is encouraged to eat fruit for a snack instead of junk food, and FEET — Family Exercise Everyday Together. FEET is a two-week program encouraging students and families to exercise 30 minutes a day and set healthy eating goals at home. Students have also been motivated with random MOB times during school hours, short for Move Our Bodies.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & LEARNING

According to the American Heart Association, physical activity in children helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints. In addition, physically active children enjoy other health benefits, such as weight control, lower blood pressure, improved psychological well being and a tendency to be more physically active as adults.



Recent research also indicates that daily physical activity (such as physical education classes and recess) positively affects academic achievement in a host of ways, including increased concentration, improved reading, writing and math test scores, and a reduction in disruptive behavior.

Aerobic exercise has been shown to improve memory and may strengthen certain parts of the brain. The oxygen intake during exercise may also enhance the important connections made between neurons (nerve connections) in the brain.

Staying physically fit can give kids the endurance to sit for lengths of time while learning in a group setting, to hold their upper bodies upright and maintain eye contact needed to learn. Physical activity that strengthens the large muscle groups leads to an increased ability to hold a pencil or crayon properly and to form letters and numbers when writing and computing.

STUDENTS ARE CHOOSING SENSIBLY

Those healthy habits also extend to the South Colonie cafeterias, where several years ago, the district began participating in the "Choose Sensibly" program.

Choose Sensibly is a campaign being promoted by the New York State School Food Service Association and its members - like South Colonie. By placing colorful Choose Sensibly buttons, stickers and stamps on healthy snacks and drinks, food service officials hope to help students identify wise food choices and sway their buying habits for the better.



To be considered a Choose Sensibly choice, snacks and drinks must meet strict dietary guidelines. Snacks, for instance, should contain 7 grams or less of fat, 2 grams or less of saturated fat, 15 grams or less of sugar and 360 grams or less of sodium. Milk (including flavored milks) must be low fat, juices must contain at least 25 percent real juice and other beverages must have 10 milligrams or less of caffeine.

To persuade students to make the "right" choices, healthier items are displayed more prominently with less fatty chips set in the front of the snack rack and nutritious juices placed lower in the refrigerator cases where elementary students can easily reach them.

Did you know?

- Nearly 1 in every 5 children or adolescents ages 2-19 years in this country are considered overweight
- In the past three decades the obesity rate has more than tripled for elementary-aged kids
- The United States has the highest prevalence of obesity among the developed nations

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