FACTS

Teaching America's Kids A Healthy Lifestyle

Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds

OVERVIEW

Childhood obesity in the United States is an epidemic. About 12 million children and adolescents ages two to 19 are considered obese.[i] As these obese children grow into adulthood, they have a much greater risk than their normal weight peers of developing and dying from chronic diseases[2]. Indeed, some experts predict that by 2015, 75% of adults will be overweight with 41% obese.[3,4] One important way to arrest this rise in childhood obesity is through strong physical education programs in our nation's schools.

Children must be physically active at school and learn about keeping healthy through exercise and eating a balanced diet. If lifetime physical activity and healthy food and beverage choices are taught at both school and home, children will have the optimal foundation for healthy living.[5] Research also shows that healthy, physically active children learn more effectively and achieve more academically.[6]

Beyond the impact on chronic disease, the obesity epidemic places a significant burden on our society. The estimated annual cost of overweight and obesity is $147 billion dollars.[7] In addition, it also affects the number of young adults who are able to qualify to enroll at police academies or pass fitness tests given to potential emergency responders and military recruits.[8]

CHILDREN NEED DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Obesity is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease (CVD), cancer, diabetes, and early death. However, children are currently not getting enough physical activity to counter the obesity epidemic.

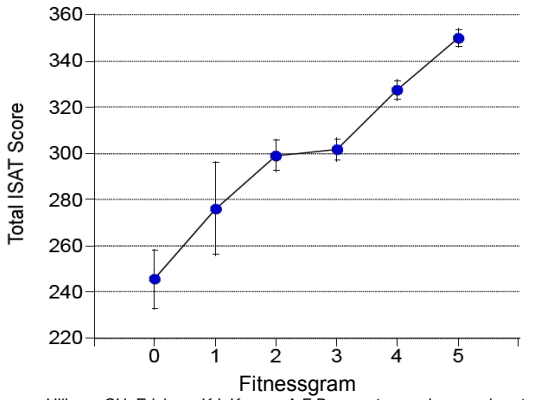
- A recent study showed that the plaque buildup in the neck arteries of obese children or those with high cholesterol is similar to those levels seen in middle-aged adults.[9]
- Of all U.S. deaths from major chronic diseases, 23% are linked to sedentary lifestyles.[10]
- In 2005, the Government Accountability Office released a report discussing key strategies to include in programs designed to target childhood obesity. Experts agreed that "increasing physical activity" was the most important component of any such program.[11]
- National guidelines recommend that children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most, and preferably. all days of the week.[12] Because they spend half their day in school, children should get 30 minutes of exercise time during the school day.
- There is strong public support for more physical education in schools: 81% of adults believe daily physical education should be mandatory.[13,14] However, a recent report revealed that physical education time has declined across many school districts since the No Child Left Behind Act took effect in 2002.[15]
- Only 3.8% of elementary, 7.9% of middle, and 2.1% of high schools provide daily physical education or its equivalent for the entire school year. Twenty-two percent of schools do not require students to take any physical education at all.[16]
- The US military reports that 27% of young Americans are too overweight to join, and around 15,000 potential recruits fail their physicals every years because they are too heavy.[17]
- A comprehensive community-based intervention that increased opportunities for physical activity before, during, and after school successfully reversed obesity in children.[18] Regular participation in PE has also been shown to reduce obesity rates in low-income students.[19]

ACTIVE CHILDREN THRIVE ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY

Physically active and educated children are more likely to thrive academically and socially. Through effective physical education, children learn how to incorporate safe and healthy activities into their lives. Physical education is an integral part of developing the "whole" child in social settings and the learning environment.

- Studies have shown that normal weight children have higher scholastic achievement, less absenteeism, and higher physical fitness than their obese counterparts.[20, 21]
- Further research shows a strong correlation between aerobic fitness and academic performance as measured by grades in core subjects and standardized test scores. [22, 23, 24]

Physical Fitness & Achievement Test Performance*



Source: Hillman CH, Erickson K I, Kramer A F Be smart, exercise your heart: Exercise effects on brain and cognition. *Nat Rev Neurosci. 2008;9 58-65.*

CHILDREN NEED QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The quality of a school's physical education classes is as important as their frequency, especially if children are to reap the full benefits of regular physical activity. Quality programs based on national and state standards that provide professional development, adequate resources, and sufficient space for physical education and activities are essential.

- Principals and physical education teachers need adequate resources to do their jobs at a high level. Just as reading, math, and science teachers receive the professional development they need, physical education teachers require the same kind of support.
- Schools need adequate space and facilities to conduct supervised, structured physical activity and physical education.

THE AHA ADVOCATES

AHA supports the Fitness Integrated with Teaching Kids Act (FIT Kids Act), which would:

- Require schools to report on the quality and quantity of physical education;
- Provide opportunities for physical activity and wellness in school programs;
- Involve parents in supporting schools in students' nutrition and physical activity; and
- Provide physical education teachers with professional development opportunities.

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