

## FACTS

# Teaching America's Kids About A Healthy Lifestyle

## Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds

### OVERVIEW

Childhood obesity in the U.S. is an epidemic: more than one in six children ages two to 19 are obese.<sup>1</sup> Obese adolescents have a 16-fold increased risk of becoming severely obese adults,<sup>2</sup> and they have a much greater risk of developing and dying from chronic diseases than their healthy weight peers.<sup>3</sup> A new study estimates that 51% of children will be overweight and 11% will be obese by 2030<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the impact on chronic disease, the obesity epidemic places a significant financial burden on our society. Nearly 21% of U.S. medical costs are attributed to the treatment of obesity<sup>5</sup> and estimates for treatment of childhood obesity are approximately \$14.3 billion.<sup>6</sup> Obesity and lack of physical fitness in America's youth is also a national security risk. Senior former military leaders report that 27% of young Americans are too overweight to serve in the military.<sup>7</sup> Around 15,000 potential recruits fail their physicals every year because they are too heavy.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the most common reason for medical disqualification among military applicants, at 23.3% is excessive weight and/or body fat.<sup>9</sup>

One important way to help stop this trend is to ensure that our nation's schools have strong physical education programs and offer opportunities for physical activity throughout the day. Since children spend a significant amount of time at school, it is essential that schools support physical activity and teach children learn how to stay healthy through exercise and a balanced diet.<sup>10</sup> If lifetime physical activity skills and healthy food and beverage choices are taught at both school and home, children will have the optimal foundation for healthy living.<sup>11</sup> Research shows that healthy, physically active children learn more effectively and efficiently and can achieve more academically.<sup>12,13</sup>

### 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.

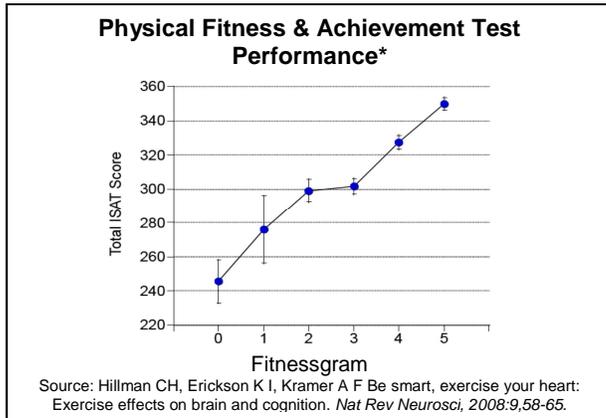
- A recent study showed that the plaque buildup in the neck arteries of obese children or those with high cholesterol is similar to those levels seen in middle-aged adults.<sup>14</sup>
- Obese pre-schoolers even show early signs of biological precursors for heart disease.<sup>15</sup>
- Sedentary lifestyles are linked to 23% of all U.S. deaths from major chronic diseases.<sup>16</sup>

- Kids are more likely to get the recommended amount of recess and physical education if they live in states or districts with policies that require or encourage those activities<sup>17,18</sup>
- Among adolescents ages 12-19, 20.3% have abnormally high cholesterol levels; unfortunately more and more children are getting diabetes due to obesity, poor diet, and physical inactivity.<sup>19</sup>
- In 2005, the Government Accountability Office reported on 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.<sup>20</sup>
- National guidelines recommend that children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most, preferably all, days.<sup>21</sup> Since children spend half their day in school, they should get 30 minutes of their daily physical activity 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.<sup>22,23</sup>
- Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, many school districts, stretched too thin on time and resources, have decreased physical education and recess time in order to focus on mandatory subjects and testing.<sup>24,25,26</sup>
- 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; more than one-fifth of schools do not require any physical education at all.<sup>27</sup>
- A comprehensive community-based intervention that increased opportunities for physical activity before, during, and after school successfully reversed obesity in children.<sup>28</sup> Regular participation in physical education has also been shown to reduce obesity rates in low-income students, who are disproportionately affected by the childhood obesity epidemic.<sup>29</sup>

### ACTIVE CHILDREN THRIVE ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY

Physically educated and active 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 a comprehensive education and developing the whole child in social settings and the learning environment. Studies have shown that healthy

weight children have higher scholastic achievement, less absenteeism, and higher physical fitness than their obese counterparts.<sup>30,31,32</sup>



## CHILDREN NEED QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The quality of a school's physical education classes is as important as their frequency 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.
- In one study, 26.1% of children attended a school without a gymnasium. Schools with adequate space and facilities to conduct supervised, structured physical activity reported more minutes of physical education per week.<sup>33</sup>

## THE ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES

The American Heart Association advocates for policies to increase physical education and activity in schools, including:

- Promote Fit Kids, legislation that would provide states with grants to establish physical education programs consistent with widely-recognized standards, collect data, and provide professional training;
- Look for opportunities to include robust legislative language, such as in the forthcoming Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization; and
- Support the Carol M. White Physical Education Program grants.

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