

Children's fitness a parental challenge

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PHOTOS BY TOM THOMPSON

“Why are little ones so big these days?” asked Wendy Crump, registered dietician for more than 15 years and owner of Nutritionally Fit in Pasadena.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of overweight children age 6 to 11 has more than doubled since 1980 and the rate of overweight adolescents has tripled.

As the rate of obesity increases so do health problems such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension, which used to be almost unknown in children.

A glance around shows many reasons for this unhealthy trend. You can point to the number of sedentary activities, such as watching TV and playing computer games, as well as the easy availability of high fat and sugary foods, such as chips and candy.

And, face it; the kids are simply following the example of their parents for we Americans, as a nation, are getting plumper every year.

Crump said parents must realize that their children take cues from them.

“As you know, they look to you as a model. And if you’re not a model for healthful eating, they will most likely follow your unhealthful lead,” she said.

Crump also advised parents to be aware of what their children are eating.

“Play a more proactive role in their diet. Serve them healthful foods whenever possible,” she said.

She said to look for foods that are high in nutritional value, not foods that are simply easy to prepare or to pick up from the local drive-through.

“Which is more important, their health or a little saved time on your part? I understand we’re all busy with too many things to do, but what it really comes down to is a simple matter of priorities. If you make healthy eating a priority, they will



Girls try out several types of exercise equipment under the supervision of Tracey Mallett, far left, of ATP Specific Training and Physical Therapy. In the front working with exercise balls are, from left, Nicole Crump, 11, Jordanne Genato, 12, and Zoe Sigel, 12. In the back are Chloe Siegel, 10, on treadmill and Camille Reyes, 12, on stationary bike.

learn to as well,” she said.

And it will be good for your health, too, she said.

As a dietician, Crump sees many children who are suffering from ailments caused by poor eating habits and lack of exercise. It’s a sad truth that most medical insurance won’t pay for her teachings to prevent disease, only to cure or control it.

“You have to have the disease before you can see a dietician,” Crump said.

She said it would be so much better for children, if their families could find the right path to good nutrition and fitness before illness strikes. To help them, Crump has joined with Tracey Mallett, co-owner of ATP Specific Training and Physical Therapy, to kick off Kids on the Run. The eight-week program focuses on healthy eating habits, positive body image and increased physical activity.

Crump said the program looks at modifying the behavior of the whole family, because children can’t do it alone.

“We work as a team. The parent or guardian has to be incorporated in all aspects of what the children are doing — menu planning, meal preparation, setting up family physical activities,” she said.

Kids on the Run features three components: exercise sessions twice a week, weekly individual meetings that focus on healthy eating and group therapy sessions twice a month that reinforce behavioral changes.

“We de-emphasize weight but emphasize healthy eating and behavioral changes. It’s not about numbers on the scale,” Crump said.

Crump encourages youngsters to set their own personal goals, whatever they think will help them; whatever is realistic for their family. For one child it might be a promise to watch one hour of television a day instead of five, to give up dessert at lunch or to go for a family bike ride every Saturday.

Therapy sessions promote self-esteem as youngsters talk about various issues. Dealing with peer pressure is always a tough one, Crump said. If a teen goes out to eat with his friends and everyone orders a Coke, fries and a hamburger, he doesn’t want to look different by ordering a salad and a Diet Coke. The kids learn how to handle that. Downsizing is one way — ordering a single burger instead of a double and a small order of fries instead of a super. Crump said promoting good self-esteem is another important goal for adolescent and prepubescent youngsters.

“This is the time they’re really recognizing their bodily changes, so they’re self-conscious. It’s important for them to feel good about who they are,” she said.

Group sessions are arranged by age. Teens might talk about fitting in at school while younger children discuss what they can do instead of watching TV.

In individual sessions, children talk about what they’ve been eating. Crump goes through the food pyramid and encourages children to eat fewer sugary, high-fat foods and more whole grains, protein and dairy.

“What I commonly see with children is zero vegetables and few fruits. Dairy is not a big one

See CHILDREN’S FITNESS, Page 16

CHILDREN'S FITNESS

Continued from page 8

either," she said.

She sees children eating a lot of chips, crackers, cookies, sugary juices and sodas.

With the parents, Crump talks about reading labels and spotting such no-nos as too much sodium and too much fat. Getting parents and children involved in planning menus makes it easier for the whole family to adopt healthier eating habits.

Physical activity is a key component of Kids on the Run.

Mallett coordinates two fitness sessions a week at ATP and encourages youngsters to add more physical activity into their daily lives.

"Most kids today are not very athletic," Mallett said. They don't even get much exercise at school."

The hour-long fitness sessions cover the whole body. They look at flexibility, coordination, strength, balance, agility, cardiovascular and posture. The programs are tailored to individual students.

"There are going to be some kids who need more cardiovascular training, or more strength or more flexibility," Mallett said.

Teaching good posture is one aspect of the program that some may find surprising; but Mallett said it's crucial.

"Posture is appalling for most of these kids," Mallett said.

Slumping and slouching lead to a bad self-image, while simply standing tall can make a big difference in a teenager's outlook.

The mind-body component of the fitness sessions includes yoga stretches and a little Pilates.

"The fitness component is different for different ages," Mallett said.

The plan calls for sessions with no more than six individuals in age groups 7 to 9, 9 to 11 and 11 to 13. Younger children will play more games and do more running around in agility training. Older children, who want to do what grownups do, may get to use some of the exercise equipment — light weights, resistance bands, etc.

"They think it's cool doing Pilates," Mallett said of teenagers.

Crump said Kids on the Run promotes the idea that exercise can be fun. It encourages the whole family to exercise together — riding bikes around the neighborhood, playing ball at the park.

"It's important to change the habits of the family, not just the child," Crump said.

"If the parents are not setting an example, then we're just banging our heads against the wall," Mallett said.

And this approach turns exercise into family fun, instead of punishment for a child who has something wrong with him because he's overweight.

"I've been working individually with children for many years," the dietician said. Crump always encouraged her clients to add more physical activity. Then she thought, wouldn't it be nice if we had all these components in one place.

Kids on the Run is the outgrowth of that idea. The new eight-week program is ongoing and individualized. Families can sign up children and adolescents any time.

It's not just for overweight children, either.

"We also encourage normal weight children. If you can form healthy eating habits and healthy exercise habits as a child, these can carry you through a lifetime," Crump said.

"Even if children are really skinny, they might not have healthy eating habits," Mallett said.

Kids on the Run is good for children who are athletic, too, because they can learn proper pos-



Camille Reyes, 12, left and Zoe Siegel, 12, work with an exercise ball.

ture, balance and flexibility, which can prevent injuries in the future.

As a physical trainer, Mallett has seen a lot of children with sports injuries. If they learn how to exercise correctly, they can reduce the chance of injury, she said.

Crump said the best gift parents can give their children is teaching them healthy eating habits and good exercise habits.

"Starting them off on the right path at a young age is one of the best things you can ever do to promote their health and long-term happiness. And they'll thank you for it by living longer, more fulfilling lives," Crump said.

For more information about Kids on the Run, call Nutritionally Fit at (626) 403-6000 or visit www.nutritionally-fit.com.