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GETTING KIDS FIT AGAIN

By Rob Maxwell, M.A.

Last year, I did a presentation for the Daytona Beach Rotary Club that focused to a large extent on obesity, and especially obesity in our youth. At that time, 33% of children were considered to be obese. The latest figures show that this percentage has climbed again in just ONE year. In fact, in the last 15 years, childhood obesity has increased by more than fifty percent. Now, fifty percent of U.S children are statistically fat. This, to me, is a crime. It has a two-fold effect. Not only is being fat or obese cosmetically tough on kids but it will make them sick as well. It is now common to see type 11 diabetes (lifestyle related) among pre-teens and teenagers. And of course, being obese as a child sets the stage for becoming an unhealthy adult.

Why is this happening? The obvious is true: Kids eat too much. It's far too easy to go to McDonalds and get a super-sized meal. Super-size was not an option when I was a kid (thank Goodness). Yes, kids eat more than they used to due to the overwhelming amount of convenience foods now available. But the much bigger problem is lower activity level. Let's face it, MOST kids don't play (aren't physically active) anymore. Not a lot. Sure, you runners get your kids out to the fun runs, but what percentage of parents actually run? Considering we'll get 100-200 runners at most 5ks, we're not really taking over the population of Daytona Beach, are we?

I could do an entire article on what we do wrong as a society with kids' health, but I have to keep this short. One problem is that kids often play more on computers than they do outside. Instead of playing football like we did as kids, they play it on the video games. Instead of playing on the skateboards and going surfing, they find video games simulate the activity. Secondly, schools continue to cut back. When I was young, we had P.E. every day and recess every day. After lunch, we got more outside time. Now, nationwide, kids are LUCKY to get P.W. three times per week. What's sad is I hear some parents say that this is a good thing. So what's going to happen? The private fitness industry will step in to take over where the community is failing and provide fitness routines for our youth. And that is what's happening. Finally, another problem is it isn't as safe as it once was for kids to play outdoors. The Daytona Beach area continue to build homes, condo, neighborhoods, and businesses, but I haven't seen too many public playground being build lately? Have you? And I've also heard from very reliable sources that, by law schools may have to prohibit after-hours access to facilities for play for fitness. Makes sense to me. Kids are getting fatter so take away yet another safe place for them to play and be active. Maybe if the government thought a little more about wellness at all ages, it could think a little less about health care 'crisis'.

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Ok, enough bad news. What can you do? As runners, and as my readers, I'm sure you'd love to hear me say get the kids out to run. But the research has not supported running as being ideal. And there is a lot of research lately, which is good news, because finally we're focusing on what to do with our youth. The best fitness program for overweight kids is a strength training program. Yes, you heard me right. Why? The biggest reason is that heavy kids only feel worse about themselves when you try to get them to do what tall the "skinny" kids do, like running or endurance exercise. They can't keep up, so they quit and feel badly about themselves, which later leads to having negative attitudes about exercise. But put them in a strength training environment and, typically, heavier kids will excel which reinforces positive feelings toward physical fitness. This is not to say that at some point all kids shouldn't learn about the value of aerobic exercise; they should. The foundation, however, should be in strength training. The second biggest reason for strength training for youth is...IT WORKS! Study after study has shown that kids who strength train drop body fat and add lean muscle tissue. And study after study has shown kids will increase their strength by working out just two times per week. (I'd be more than happy to review these studies with anyone interested.) What this means is kids get healthier AND feel better about themselves. And not just physically. These studies also demonstrate that overweight kids begin to socially interact with other kids and feel more positive about themselves as well as exercise after taking part in a strength training program.

One fear people have had through the years is that it's not safe for children to perform strength training movements. The latest research (actually over the past 15 years) states, however, that this is simply not true. Strength training programs done right by people trained to teach them have shown nothing but positive results. In fact, studies have shown that they bone density increase at the prèt—en age is far greater than at any other time. And youth who use strength training programs build greater bone density than those who don't. This is definitely the time to build bones! Of course, you must use common sense. Don't just send your kids to a gym and cut them loose. Free weights, for example, are not recommended for any prèt—en. There are programs available now that specifically use the research on kids I'm discussing today. Those of us who have designed such a program would be glad to help nay of you with a program for you kids. At Maxwell's we are not fully equipped to handle the workout needs of youth with programs for kids age 7-13 and 13-19. Working with me on the fight against childhood obesity are other local fitness professionals. Fee free to call me for other contacts who are prepared to provide strength training programs for children.