

Running and Walking Clubs

Fill the school PE gap

Margaret Dilloway

With one out of three American kids overweight or obese, every child is at risk. Even in sunny San Diego, getting enough activity isn't always easy.

"Physical activity is one of the best brain fuels," says Naomi Butler, co-chair of San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative's After-School Domain. Active kids perform better academically and exhibit better behavior.

"I challenge people to do five to 10 minutes of activity per day for two weeks to see a difference. Parents can get up five minutes earlier and do this with their kids," says Butler.

Michelle Murphy Zive, M.S., R.D., and author of *You Can Lose Your Baby Fat*, cites environmental changes like bigger portions and increased computer time, "but the ultimate cause of obesity is based on the energy equation. Too many calories in and not enough out. It's not rocket science."

Perhaps the most important time for physical activity is before school, but go to a typical San Diego elementary school

before the first bell, and you won't see a traditional free-play recess. At some schools, children who arrive early stand in line for 20 minutes.

"Schools aren't meeting their PE [physical education] minutes," says Butler.

"The teacher's contracts have no before school or lunch duty," says Darlene Cason, interim principal of Dailard Elementary in San Carlos. "So what you have is a parent-initiated program, like our walking club."

At a walking club, kids get to school early and walk laps; they might be rewarded with a weekly Popsicle. Other schools have parent-run aerobics or a walking school bus, in which kids who live within a mile of the school get "picked up" by a parent volunteer and walked to school in a group.

After-school activities, like sports and dance, help meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, especially if they conveniently take place on campus.

"Kids have different abilities and different financial abilities," says Deirdre Kleske, co-chair of San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative and Project LEAN. "The more opportunities you give kids to be

active, the better."

Green Elementary, a PE magnet school in San Carlos, has done just this. Students have structured PE four times a week with two full-time PE teachers plus a running club before school. They practice sports like gymnastics, learn how to perform exercises correctly and even have swimming classes paid for by the PTA.

Parents like Margaret Luch find the program invaluable. "I want them to feel physical activity is a part of life, and even when they are older hopefully they will incorporate exercise into their daily lives."

Green is a special case. Other schools rely solely on volunteers, who can be scarce. At Marvin Elementary in Allied Gardens, there are no before-school activities. There's also no PE teacher.

"We've been trying to get a running club for a few years," says Anita Williamson, whose two children have attended Marvin for the past five years. She notes that while there's been interest, it has yet to be organized. "I know they don't get enough physical activity. Even something that's three times a week would be great."



Getting parent volunteers is an issue, acknowledges Shari Grayson, HHP. She volunteers for her son's running club at Longfellow Elementary. "You really need three parents to run it, but sometimes you can't get them." Volunteers are also required to get tested for TB before can they work with the kids.

The activity issue isn't just about obesity. "There's a much greater academic link than people realize," says Kleske. "Sitting makes the blood pool in the lower extremities. The brain works better with exercise. Having kids sit for long periods of time is inappropriate."

Physical education, like art and music, is considered expendable. "When state testing comes up the first thing to go is PE or recess because students have to study," Zive says.

This is a problem, Kleske says. "If I expect them to sit down for two hours and do math, I'd want them to get exercise first."

So what to do in a world where playgrounds are locked up shortly after the bell?

Teachers:

- Make play a reward for work well done.
- Take activity breaks in the middle of the day to recharge.
- Play games like "Red Light, Green Light." Teach kids conflict resolution to use at recess, using rock-paper-scissors to solve disputes, says Cindy Wilson, communications director of Sports4Kids.org, a nonprofit organization that helps schools develop recess programs.
- Incorporate unstructured play. The National Association for the Education of Young Children says that this reduces stress and helps children learn social skills.
- Use an activity log to record minutes and turn it into math work.

Parents:

- Play with your kids or take walks.
- Cook with your kids. Make them a part of meal planning.
- Don't make foods off-limits; teach moderation.

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