

CHAPTER 1 THE FUTURE IS NOW

There's no better time than right now for someone to begin a quest for a healthier lifestyle by exercising more and eating better. This message is, perhaps, most essential and applicable to the younger generation.

Kids who participate in physical activities on a regular basis stand to obtain many benefits. Let's see what physical activities can offer.

BENEFITS

For one thing, physical activity aids in the normal growth and development of the bones and soft tissues (specifically, the muscles and fibrous tissues such as tendons and ligaments). Strengthening these biological components is an excellent precautionary measure against injury. And by increasing their functional strength, young athletes can perform closer to their physical potential. Another area that's improved by physical activity is aerobic fitness (aka "cardiovascular fitness" and "cardiorespiratory fitness") which enables young athletes to prepare for the demands of sport.

In addition, physical activity helps kids to maintain a healthy bodyweight and desirable percentage of body fat. Furthermore, physical activity allows youths to perform daily tasks with less fatigue. Physical activity develops a wide range of motor skills that can be used in everyday functions and leisure pursuits, too. Yet another benefit is the prevention of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension and obesity. Research has shown that physical activity at an early age reduces the risk of experiencing coronary heart disease at a later age.

Not to be forgotten are various psychological, emotional and mental benefits. Physical activity improves body image along with self-discipline, self-confidence and self-esteem during the critical time when the so-called "adolescent identity" is formed. Kids who are physically active are less prone to emotional disturbances and more outgoing and optimistic. Physical activity can be used as an outlet to release tension and reduce stress as well as decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety. What's more, physical activity increases alertness and interest in learning. Finally, a youth who engages in physical activity has less chance of being teased and/or bullied.

YOUTH FITNESS PAST AND PRESENT

Despite the multitude of benefits that can be derived from physical activity, there are widespread worries about the fitness of America's youth. But these concerns are nothing new. In the early 1950s, six tests of muscular strength and flexibility - designed by Dr. Hans Kraus and Dr. Sonja Weber - were given to about 7,500 American and European youths aged six to 16 from comparable urban and suburban communities. The tests were identical to those given to muscularly deficient subjects and, as such, were by no means considered strenuous. Yet, the tests revealed that American youth weren't as fit as their European counterparts: 56% of the Americans failed at least one of the tests while 8% of the Europeans failed.

The findings were highly publicized and brought to the attention of President Dwight D. Eisenhower who was described by various sources as being "shocked" and "appalled." In response to the low level of fitness among America's youth, Ike established the President's Council on Youth Fitness in 1956 (which was the forerunner of the current President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports). Near the end of 1960, President-elect John F. Kennedy

described the results of the so-called "Kraus-Weber Tests" as "the most startling demonstration of the general physical decline of American youth."

Fast-forward half a century or so and not much has changed. If anything, actually, the fitness of America's youth has worsened. In a 2006 study, for example, about 5,000 fifth and seventh graders in Georgia took a fitness test that was created by The Cooper Institute of Dallas, Texas. It was found that 52% of the students failed the test of cardiorespiratory (aerobic) fitness and 57% failed at least two of the four tests for strength, flexibility and muscular endurance. Plus, the study found that 29.5% of the students were overweight.

Here are some other statistics that relate to the fitness of America's youth:

- Since the early 1970s, the percentage of youths who are overweight has more than quadrupled among those aged 6 to 11 (increasing from 4.0% to 18.8%) and nearly tripled among those aged 12 to 19 (increasing from 6.1% to 17.4%).
- More than 33% of youths aged 2 to 19 - more than 25 million youths - are overweight or obese.
- 33% of youths in grades 9-12 get insufficient amounts of moderate to vigorous activity.
- 13.1% of high school students are overweight and another 15.7% are at risk for becoming overweight.

There are many more statistics that indicate America's youth are overweight and out of shape. But one of the most troubling statistics of all is that 60% of obese children aged 5 to 10 have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease (such as high cholesterol, triglycerides, insulin or blood pressure) and 25% have at least two risk factors. Equally alarming is that 30% of boys and 40% of girls who were born in 2000 are at risk for being diagnosed with diabetes at some point in their lives. Finally, these statistics don't bode well for the future since 70% of overweight adolescents are destined to become overweight or obese adults.

So, it's painfully evident that the fitness of our nation's kids is in dire straits. How can we reverse this trend and shape America's youth? Before tackling this difficult question, it's important to first understand the concept of fitness.

WHAT IS FITNESS?

At one time or another, most people have been encouraged by someone - a family member, friend, physical-education teacher, coach or whomever - to exercise and/or participate in physical activities in order to "get fit." However, the concept of fitness - or what it takes to "get fit" - can be nebulous and confusing. Indeed, the question of "what constitutes fitness" can yield a variety of responses such as "being in good health" or "running a mile in less than 10 minutes" or "doing at least 30 modified sit-ups in one minute." Fitness can even be likened to a certain "look" such as "possessing a lean, athletic or muscular body" or "having rock-hard abs." While many of these interpretations are certainly characteristic of fitness, there's a great deal more to it than that.

As a Chinese proverb wisely points out, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." So, too, does the journey to improved fitness. In this case, the first step is to define the meaning of fitness. This somewhat simple term can be viewed as "the ability to perform specific daily tasks as efficiently and effectively as possible." At first glance, this

description seemingly lacks a concrete set of standards by which it can be measured and, therefore, should be quantified by individuals based on their personal objectives for fitness. Like many things in life, what's good for one kid may not necessarily be good for another. For the true meaning of fitness to be understood, then, it must be realized that the idea of getting fit is a very individualized process, geared specifically to each youth's needs and preferences.

For example, a program that consists of a two-mile run followed by some bodyweight squats and push-ups might serve one youth just fine in terms of developing an adequate level of fitness whereas another youth may very well find that this routine is far too challenging. Young athletes who participate in contact sports will need to augment the supportive strength of their neck and lower back to reduce their risk of injury while overweight youths may need, at least initially, to "get moving" by simply engaging in a walking program.

Because there are literally an infinite number of individual variables to consider, it's virtually impossible to construct a boilerplate or "cookie-cutter" regimen that's appropriate for increasing everyone's fitness. Nonetheless, there's a common denominator here and that's the link between physical activity and improved fitness. Indeed, a cause-and-effect relationship exists in that the intensity of an activity prompts the body to make physical changes to meet its demands. So, essentially, physical activity is the catalyst (the "cause") that stimulates the changes (the "effect"). The body recognizes exercise - in any of its many forms - as effort or stress (technically, a stimulus). As a result, the body adjusts to this stress by improving its functional ability. It does so by increasing in strength, size, aerobic fitness and flexibility as needed (but within its capacity), thus priming an environment in which the body can become more fit. The take-home message is that exercise by itself isn't the overriding factor in making improvements in fitness; but rather, it's the level of effort that's put forth on a consistent basis.

THE FAB FIVE OF FITNESS

Although youths will embark on their own journey to improve their fitness and shape their future, it's important to realize that each youth will follow a somewhat different path based on their unique experiences, objectives and genetics (or inherited characteristics). Yet, the simple fact remains that each youth must adopt the same five components of fitness: flexibility, aerobic fitness, strength, recovery and proper nutrition.

Whether it's a 10-year-old child who is beginning an exercise program or a 16-year-old adolescent who has been competing and training for years, the infrastructure that comprises their "fitness profile" stays the same. Of course, the amount of emphasis that's placed on each component must be considered for each youth based on variables such as physiological age and emotional maturity. But if a youth is to become more fit, all five components need to be addressed regularly.

Although the five components are defined and described in a sequential order and seem very different from one another, this is by design so as to separate and relay pertinent information. It must be noted, however, that all components should be seen in the same light since no single area is more vital than another. One additional key point - which will be explicated in subsequent chapters - is that these components aren't as segregated as their descriptions may imply. Simply put, there's a great deal of carryover between the various components and none truly function independently of the others. Furthermore, the ultimate success of an action plan for shaping

America's kids hinges on the effort and commitment made to improve all of these areas, not just a select few.

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