

Youth Fitness: An Action Plan for Shaping America's Kids

An interview with co-author, Fred Fornicola

By Rick Rignell

Fred Fornicola contacted me recently with some very exciting news about a new book project he and Matt Brzycki have in the works. With their first collaboration, *Dumbbell Training for Strength and Fitness* hitting 10,000 copies sold in just a little over two years, Matt and Fred are teaming up again, but this time their focus is on the fitness of America's youth. Fred wanted to discuss their latest project with me, *Youth Fitness: An Action Plan for Shaping America's Kids* so I put together a little interview to pick Fred's brain about the many different aspects that he and Matt tackle in their book. There is probably no better way to glean insight into Fred's thoughts and feelings about the health of America's kids and what this new book is about than discussing specific aspects of youth fitness with Fred. The following is my interview with co-author, Fred Fornicola.

Rick: There are few, if any, books out there that address the topic of youth fitness. What inspired you and Matt to write this book?

Fred: This book has been something Matt and I have been discussing off and on for a couple of years now. It's a topic that is important to us for several reasons. First and foremost, we each have a kid (my daughter Alexa is 13 and Matt's son Ryan is 11) and as parents, we both feel it's important for our kid's to be physically active so they can experience good healthy physically, mentally and emotionally. Secondly, as individuals in the field of fitness, we understand the value of what a well-rounded fitness program can offer a youth and we hope to help influence parents, coaches and teachers that there is a need for youth fitness to be taken more seriously. That is why we cover topics such as strength training, cardiovascular exercise, nutrition, flexibility, childhood diabetes and obesity, as well as other issues that are related to youth health and fitness.

Rick: I'm a High School Physical Education teacher, working with students ages 14-18. One disturbing trend that I've seen over the years is what I call a "fitness gap." On one end of the spectrum, you've got kids who are athletic and very fit, and on the other end, you have kids that are very unfit and inactive. There seems to be little in between. Have you noticed this trend also?

Fred: Absolutely Rick and it's a disturbing observation for sure. When I was a kid I played outside all the time, participated in organized and informal sports and stayed active. Kids today are very sedentary. They spend way too much time watching TV, staring at a computer screen and "texting". It seems as though only kids that are serious about sports participate in an exercise program. These kids seem to understand the value of what a fitness program can provide; not only for their health but their athletic career as well. Then you have the other end of the spectrum where kids think "why bother, I'm not involved in sports" so they don't think they need to stay with a formalized program and end up do nothing remotely physical. This, of course, is a huge mistake and is now becoming a major problem for today's kids. Every kid needs to exercise to promote overall good health. And we can't turn a blind eye to the rising rate of child obesity and diabetes. It's a very sad state of affairs and it's increasing to epidemic proportions and it needs to be addressed on many levels - and right now!

Rick: Because so many kids are in such poor shape, it can be challenging to get them involved in a fitness program without turning them off. Do you have any strategies for dealing with this challenge?

Fred: It's been my experience Rick that in dealing with young kids (and adults as well), a fitness program needs to meet a kid's needs physically, mentally and emotionally. In doing so, we as parents and fitness professionals need to do our "due diligence" and learn as much as we can so we can offer our kids every opportunity to make their fitness program one that can be enjoyable, challenging and rewarding. Most importantly, we need to make it so a kid will want to be consistent in performing their exercise. There are several things you can do to get a kid moving. Something as simple as having them go for walks or getting involved in organized activities can be a start. A great way to get them going is to have them get an "exercise buddy". Having a training partner makes working out more fun and can offer some friendly competition. Also, there's a tendency for each participant to feel a sense of obligation to the other and therefore there is a greater likelihood of each staying with the program. If a friend isn't available, it's a great time for a parent, teacher or coach to step in and participate in the youth's fitness program.

A good way to get a kid to stay with an exercise program is to offer a condensed plan that is simple and straight forward. When it comes to strength training, I often use a simple approach that has been quite successful over the years. I subscribe to what I have found to be an effective philosophy which requires a youth to perform two or three full-body workouts each week. Each of these sessions generally last no more than 30 minutes. In recommending this approach, most kids can squeeze exercise into their academic, personal and social lives and they can mentally handle training for 30 minutes or less a couple times each week. It's important to recognize that although the training sessions are brief, they can be very effective for improving strength, cardiovascular health and flexibility if done correctly. Matt and I have spent many years training people and getting young individuals involved in fitness and we discuss in our book, in detail, our concepts along with additional ideas of how to use various types of equipment, training protocols and much more so kids will want to exercise - and stick with it.

Rick: One thing that I've noticed with my Physical Education classes is that the majority of the student's, fit or unfit, seem to enjoy strength training. Do we emphasize strength training enough as a youth fitness activity?

Fred: I believe there are more efforts being made to expose young people to strength training, but as you know, there is a lot more to it than just walking into a gym and picking up a weight. There are many aspects of strength training that need to be considered. Initially, a kid needs to be taught proper form so they don't become injured and since there are many takes or opinions on what proper form entails, Matt and I prescribe specifics that have worked for us over several decades of training ourselves and others - especially the kids. In addition, a program needs to be devised that will be effective for that particular youth along with determining what equipment is suitable to their structure and their needs. In conjunction, they also need appropriate supervision.

As you know Rick, there are countless philosophies and methodologies when it comes to fitness - strength training in particular - and therefore there are some confusing issues. It's unfortunate, but there are many myths and misconceptions propagated in the field of fitness and the various information that is disseminated can be paralyzing to parents, coaches and kids. There are many different approaches to strength training as you know - some being very good and others being downright dangerous - and when we're dealing with young people especially, safety is the number one consideration. We must keep in mind as well that strength training is just

one aspect of becoming physically fit. There are other components that need to be addressed on an ongoing basis for a kid to have a well-balanced action plan.

Rick: Many kids seem to have developed the mentality that "if it's uncomfortable, I have to stop." Obviously, we don't want to injure kids, but productive training can involve some discomfort. How do we work around that mentality?

Fred: Great question Rick and I agree completely, productive training is challenging, but anything worth while usually is. As you accurately pointed out, we certainly don't want anyone getting injured and as we both know, strength training is a great way of helping to prevent injury. But hard and productive training can be performed safely and is a learned process that can take some time. Being "uncomfortable" is one of the by-products, if you will, of training and when inhibitors like discomfort come into play, a youth has a choice to get past it or not - to improve or not. For some it may come easy, and for others it may be insurmountable for a while, either way, it can be done. A couple of years ago, Kim Wood, a 28 year veteran NFL strength coach shared with me a very valuable lesson. He told me that teaching someone to "train hard on their own" (along with using proper form) was one of the most important things I could teach. After tens of thousands of applications, I couldn't agree more. Having a kid work hard for themselves can be a struggle at times so what I usually encourage kids to do is draw an imaginary line in the sand to represent their "comfort level". Since getting past discomfort is more a mental aspect of exercise than a physical one, they can now focus on getting past a specific point mentally instead of physically. Now when they approach their comfort level I encourage them to cross over the line by doing just a little more than they did last time...just giving a little more of themselves than they normally would. This "crossing over the line" is a very important step for a youth to make. A kid will see that they can get past these hurdles and they experience a new-found sense of accomplishment. Having a kid do this time and time again over subsequent workouts will encourage them to work harder on their own because they've found the value in what they are accomplishing. Not only will they become stronger and more fit, they will also develop what we refer to as "mental toughness" and that goes far beyond the weight room in daily life.

Rick: Do you see one gender as becoming less fit than the other?

Fred: That's an interesting question, but I'd have to say no. Unfortunately, I think both genders are far from being remotely fit and therefore need to step it up with regards to their fitness. On the flip side, there are those who participate in sports and seem to focus on their fitness - at least for their "in-season" and there too it seems to be balanced between the girls and guys. I just so happen to work with more girls than boys and the girls I work with really get at it when they train - usually more so than the guys. Hey, I'm not trying to take a cheap shot at the guys here but the girls are far less hung-up on bench pressing and doing curls and just do what needs to get done.

Rick: Does exercise have to be fun, or do kids get enough of that with video games, computers, etc.?

Fred: I think exercise should be enjoyable in the sense that a kid isn't exercising reluctantly. Making a kid do something that isn't fun won't build a positive or long-lasting approach to fitness and raises the chances of them becoming injured because they are less focused. There are many ways for kids to be fit and athletic and we need to expose kids to as many aspects of safe, efficient and effective fitness practices as possible. This way, a kid can develop his or her own means of staying in shape and have it be a part of their life forever.

Rick: I remember having teachers and coaches who were not only great role models, but great fitness role models. Do kids today have enough good fitness role models?

Fred: That's a tough question to answer. Honestly, I don't know. There is no one of notoriety that I can think of but I do feel that ideally, it should be the parents who are the role models. Like everything else that's involved with raising a kid, education starts in the home. Teaching kids about exercise and eating right can't be a "do as I say, not as I do" philosophy that will work. Keep in mind it's the parents who are the ones that go to the food stores and the drive-thru's. They have the choice of buying healthy, wholesome foods or foods that aren't nutritious. In conjunction, those responsible on the school level may need to address physical fitness with more "oomph". Gym and health classes don't seem to have the same positive impact they did years back. Kids nowadays seem to view gym as a "break between classes" and I think that P.E. and Health deserve the same respect as any other subject in school. Kids just don't seem to see the value in what is being offered and are suffering because of it.

Rick: What can parents do to help their kids become more fit?

Fred: Like I mentioned, parents need to "lead by example." I believe that if parents are exercising and eating nutritious foods they are exemplifying good habits and it is a great way to help their kids become more involved in a healthy fitness regimen. Seeking out a qualified fitness professional is another step in the right direction as well. Parents can also become more informed about what is involved in planning a sound fitness program by reading, but as I stated earlier, there is a lot of information out there and a lot of it can be contradictory. Matt and I wanted to share what we've learned over several decades of being involved in physical fitness and feel we put our best foot forward in doing this book. We cover the many aspects of what is involved in developing a well-rounded fitness program and offer insight and recommendations on what it takes to help shape America's kids.

Rick: Thanks for the interview, Fred. Thanks for the work that you and Matt are doing to promote fitness in general, and youth fitness in particular. Best of luck with the new book!

Fred: Rick, it was my pleasure.

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Youth Fitness: An Action Plan for Shaping America's Kids is being sold at Barnes & Noble and Border's book stores as well as on-line at Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble.com and other fine stores. Orders through Premiere Personal Fitness will be autographed by the authors.