Creating a Healthy Lifestyle for Preteen Girls

Why are so many preteen girls jeopardizing their health each year by starving themselves, binge eating, not exercising, smoking, and other harmful behaviors? There is no single answer, but for many of these girls an obsession with being thin and beautiful, coupled with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and poor nutritional choices, is a recipe for disaster.

While there is no clear-cut solution to this dilemma, a positive step may lie in encouraging girls to be physically active. When girls learn to value their bodies at a young age, they build confidence and self-esteem that makes them less likely to succumb to peer pressures and make unhealthy decisions.

Unfortunately, transforming this knowledge into action for preteen girls is a challenge. Under pressure to save money and prepare students to pass standardized tests, many schools are eliminating physical education and recess. In addition, the spirit of fun and camaraderie in girls’ sports is being replaced with an obsession for winning.

Finding the “Athlete Within”

What has been proven effective in countering this trend are after-school programs that provide constant reinforcement of physical activity for girls. One such program is Girls in Training (GIT), which blends exercise, nutritional awareness, life skills, education, and fun. Started in 2002 by a group of Virginia women, GIT targets girls ages 9–12 in public and parochial schools.

The program combines half-day workshops that introduce the basics of fitness, nutrition, smoking abstinence, and positive body image with eight-week after-school “fitness camps” that put the workshop ideals into practice. The camps are led by trained group leaders who provide instruction and counseling for the girls during twice-weekly sessions.

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...girls are turned off by the competitive nature of sports, there are non-traditional physical activities that even a self-described klutz can find interesting and enjoyable. The program encourages girls to discover the “athlete within” through activities that get them moving, like calisthenics, aerobic dancing, running—even hopscotch.

To acquaint the girls to a variety of activities, many GIT sessions use circuit training. One five-minute circuit station may focus on pushups for strength training, another on step-ups for dexterity, a third on jumping jacks for calisthenics, and the final station may feature kick boxing for aerobic exercise. Popular music piped into the gym keeps things lively, and when the girls go outside the music goes with them.

In addition to physical activities, the girls are taught to think positively about themselves and others. For example, in an exercise to demonstrate the impact of bullying, fourth- and fifth-grade girls sit in a circle holding paper hearts, which they fold every time someone gives an example of a familiar insult like “stupid,” or “lazy,” or “ugly.” Soon the paper hearts are too small to fold any further. Then the girls are encouraged to provide complimentary words.

With each one, the hearts are unfolded until they have resumed their original shapes.

Couch Potatoes No More

Measuring the results of the program is a key part of its successful implementation. At the beginning of each workshop, participants fill out a six-page questionnaire that asks them to provide background information and their opinions and experiences related to such issues as smoking, weight, body image, eating habits, and exercise. At the end of the eight weeks, a post-workshop questionnaire is administered. Analysis indicates that program participation enhances girls’ capacities to have reasonable, realistic, and positive self-images.

Schools where the GIT program has been implemented are enthusiastic about its positive impact. Miriam Hughey-Guy, principal at Barcroft Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, says, “Girls in Training provides the additional tools the girls need to be strong, independent women.”

There’s not much question about results when you have girls who couldn’t do a pushup at the start of the program cruising through 20 or more by the end. More importantly, while programs like Girls in Training are helping to develop happy, healthy, and active young women, they are also laying a positive foundation of confidence and self-esteem for girls before they have to face the pressures of middle school.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Girls in Training, go to www.girlsintraining.org.