

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Youth Physical Wellness Information for Caregivers

Background

Physical wellness promotes the emotional and psychological well-being of students. Healthy students can use their talents and abilities to make meaningful contributions to society. In addition, students who receive a balanced nutritional diet and remain physically active possess a greater potential for academic success and emotional development.

Children and adolescents who eat well and stay fit are more resilient than their peers who eat unhealthy food and live a sedentary lifestyle at home. When children live a life grounded in wellness, they feel more competent and report higher levels of life satisfaction. This focus on wellness, in turn, may prevent the onset of many mental and physical health problems.

Wellness is a holistic approach to improving the overall health children. Caregivers, in many ways, determine the adoption of healthy habits for their children. By fostering the physical and emotional well-being of children, caregivers can promote attitudes and behaviors that lead to a life of mental and physical health.

What are the benefits of wellness?

- Students who eat a balanced nutritional diet have higher levels of academic performance.
- Students who maintain a balanced diet miss fewer days of school due to illness.
- Students who engage in regular physical activity have a better attitude toward school.
- Students who regularly exercise show reduced signs of hyperactivity and aggression.
- Sports and other after school activities provides promotes self-esteem and independence.
- Students display less disruptive behavior as a consequence of regular physical activity.
- Students who eat well and exercise regularly show fewer signs of anxiety or depression.

What can we do to promote wellness?

- **Model wellness for your children.** Actions speak louder than words when it comes to promoting a healthy lifestyle. Try to gradually phase out some of the junk food in your house and replace it with healthier snack alternatives (e.g., dried fruit, multigrain bread). Also, your kids will be encouraged to see you working out – try to involve them in your fitness routine.
- **Talk about the food they eat at school.** Do your children eat snacks from vending machines? Do they eat (and enjoy) the meals you prepare for them? Beginning a dialogue about healthy eating shows children the importance and value of wellness.
- **Get your child involved in some form of physical activity.** Traditionally, students equate physical activity with sports alone or competition. While sports provide a great aerobic exercise, there are other opportunities for students to remain physically active. Activities such as karate, hiking, and bike riding allow for individualistic exercise. In addition, serving as a drama technician, joining a dance group, and participating in historical reenactments each require a great deal of sustained exertion. In addition, students can work for charitable organizations such as Habit for Humanity as a way of staying active and enhancing their high school resume.
- **Learn about the physical education program at your child's school.** Do physical education teachers clearly high the short and long-term benefits of eating well and working out? Does the teacher encourage all students to participate in physical education programs? While many students naturally gravitate to sports, your child may be less confident in his or her ability to

perform physically. Find out whether your child really gets a decent work out from gym class. It is also a good idea to have a list of your school's clubs and intramural activities as well as extra curricular activities in the community.

- **Ask administrators about wellness in your child's school.** What sort of attitude does the administration have toward wellness? Do they care if a child appears overweight or underweight? Do teachers send notes home if a child looks exhausted? Try to also get a sense of the nutritional value of food served throughout the entire campus. Does it meet FDA guidelines? If not, meet with the school administration to discuss a plan to improve the nutrition of campus food.
- **Get your child involved with health/awareness fairs and workshops.** These events typically have information for both prevention as well as improvement regarding physical health. In addition, they have fun activities for students to participate in such as raffles, book exchanges, massages, and door prizes. It is a good idea to keep a list of upcoming events on a bulletin board outside of your office.
- **For additional activities to promote physical wellness,** contact your local YMCA, YWCA, Boy/Girl Scouts, Police Athletic Leagues, Community Centers, after school programs, and other community programs. Sources for information on these resources include Baltimore's Child (www.baltimoreschild.com), Maryland family magazine (www.marylandfamilymagazine.com), and KidsNews.

Helpful Forms and Handouts:

- **Growing Alberta:**
 - *Brain Food:* <http://www.growingalberta.com/parents/default.asp?id=350>.
- **American Heart Association:**
 - *Top Ten Ways to Help Children Develop Healthy Habits:* <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3030485>.
- KidsHealth:
 - *Caffeine and Your Child:* http://kidshealth.com/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/caffeine.html.
 - *Deciphering Food Labels:* http://kidshealth.com/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/food_labels.html.
 - *How Can I Get My Child to Eat Vegetables:* http://kidshealth.com/parent/nutrition_fit/nutri_fit_qa/eat_vegetables.html.
 - *How Much Exercise is Too Much:* http://kidshealth.com/parent/nutrition_fit/nutri_fit_qa/too_much_exercise.html.
 - *School Lunches:* http://kidshealth.com/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/lunch.html.
 - *Your Child's Weight:* http://kidshealth.com/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/childs_weight.html.
- United States Department of Agriculture
 - *Anatomy of MyPyramid:* http://www.mypyramid.gov/downloads/MyPyramid_Anatomy.pdf.
 - *Education Framework:* http://www.mypyramid.gov/downloads/MyPyramid_education_framework.pdf.
 - *Food Intake Patterns:* http://www.mypyramid.gov/downloads/MyPyramid_Food_Intake_Patterns.pdf.

- *Sample Menus for a 2000 Calorie Food Pattern:*
http://www.mypyramid.gov/downloads/sample_menu.pdf.

Additional Resources:

American School Board Journal (2005). *Getting to wellness: Food, fitness, and learning for life – What your schools can do*. Retrieved March 7, 2006 from <http://www.asbj.com/wellness/S3.html>.

United States Department of Agriculture. (2006). Retrieved March 7, 2006 from <http://www.mypyramid.gov/>.

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