

# AFTERSCHOOL ALERT

## ISSUE BRIEF



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## Afterschool and Healthy Youth

Afterschool programs often play an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles for youth. Many programs offer youth opportunities to engage in an array of organized physical activities such as softball, martial arts or ballet. Most programs also serve healthy afternoon snacks while emphasizing the value of a nutritious diet. Physical fitness activities after school not only promote health but also serve as crime deterrents, teach youth positive values, and impart knowledge and skills to help youth establish lifelong healthy habits.

### Promoting Healthy Habits

Since the Surgeon General declared childhood obesity a national epidemic in 2002, much attention has been focused on the health risks associated with sedentary lifestyles and poor nutrition. Of particular concern is the parallel increase in the prevalence of type 2 diabetes in youth. Recently, the CDC estimated that one in three U.S. children born in 2000 will develop diabetes in their lifetime. The odds for African-American and Hispanic children are much worse: nearly half are likely to develop the disease.<sup>1</sup> There is also increasing concern about the costs related to unhealthy lifestyles. Direct medical costs related to physical inactivity in 2000, were estimated to be \$76.6 billion.<sup>2</sup> The public-health costs related to obesity were estimated to be \$117 billion in 2000, nearly as much as the \$140 billion in costs associated with smoking.<sup>3</sup>

According to the CDC, 61.5 percent of children ages 9-13 do not participate in any organized physical activity outside of school hours, and 22.6 percent do not engage in any type of physical activity during free time.<sup>4</sup> Experts agree that strategies to promote healthy behaviors in our youth must focus on reducing sedentary activities, ensuring that all youth have access to daily, quality opportunities for physical activity, and providing nutrition education and access to healthy foods. Afterschool programs provide much-needed opportunities to promote and support healthy lifestyles in our youth.

- With a grant from the Kansas Health Foundation, the Southwest YMCA in Topeka launched an afterschool physical fitness program aimed at encouraging children between the ages of 5 and 12 to get physically active. More than 50 students in the YMCA's Prime Time program participate in Fit for Youth. In addition to providing healthy snacks, the program uses pedometers, obstacle courses, games and active play to engage youth and encourage them to participate in physical activities.

*If we can encourage three to four kids to stay physically fit, then we've done our part,*

- Jim Green, health and wellness director for Southwest YMCA.<sup>5</sup>

- The After-School Corporation has partnered with the STRANG Cancer Prevention Center to implement "Healthy Children, Healthy Futures," an innovative health and wellness curriculum for youth between the ages of 9 and 12. At the end of the ten-week program, participants create multi-media public service announcements to educate their communities about the importance of a healthy lifestyle. The PSAs, in the form of posters, radio ads and animated video spots, are reviewed by students' peers. Last year's winning project was made into a studio-produced animated ad with the students' own voices used in the voiceovers.

*...the students were engaged from beginning to end...This program was a great experience that will stick with them for the rest of their lives.*

- Albert Pollard, site coordinator for Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House at IS 126<sup>6</sup>

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"Because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents" – U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona

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- Generation Service, City Year Rhode Island’s afterschool program, just completed a two-year nutrition and healthy lifestyles program called “It’s in Your Hands Healthy Kids.” Designed in partnership with Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, the program targets underserved communities in Providence, Newport, Pawtucket and Woonsocket, where nearly half of the children come from single-parent families and 31 percent live in poverty.

*Adequate nutrition and healthy lifestyles are critical to our children’s growth and future. ‘It’s in Your Hands Healthy Kids’ has become an invaluable program for the children we serve.*

– Robert Bonazoli, interim director of City Year Rhode Island.<sup>7</sup>

### **Building Self-Esteem and Positive Attitudes**

Physical activity also promotes a heightened sense of well-being and confidence through both teamwork and individual accomplishments. One study found that children ages 9 and 10 who participate in sports tend to have a higher sense of self-worth and physical competence than their peers who do not participate in sports.<sup>8</sup> Physical fitness activities and sports also offer youth an opportunity to challenge cultural and gender stereotypes. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, supervised physical activity may also help steer youth away from crime and delinquency.<sup>9</sup>

- Hidden talents and newfound confidence are being discovered through San Antonio Sports Foundation’s Dreams for Youth afterschool program. Created in 1993, Dreams for Youth trains more than 4,000 disadvantaged San Antonio youth each year in six Olympic sports.<sup>10</sup> Participation in nutrition, dance and gymnastics classes offered through the program helped one shy second-grader, at risk of developing diabetes, learn how to make healthy choices, and led to tremendous gains in self-confidence.

*She was a very negative child. But she’s more outgoing now. She knows that she can do it...And she’s very confident in herself... She wants to try anything and everything.*

– Mother of a Dreams for Youth participant.<sup>11</sup>

- Central Park’s North Meadow Recreation Center in New York allows “at-risk” youth to tackle a 30-foot climbing wall after school to help them learn about overcoming obstacles. Homework time, fitness education, workouts and group sessions that emphasize building life skills are combined with the rock climbing to reach inner-city adolescents, many of whom are in danger of being held back a grade.

*I used to play a lot, that’s why I didn’t pass. This time I’m a lot more serious with my teachers. I think it’s this program. When we rock climb...I get out of my home and hang out with other kids I never knew. It feels really cool.*

– North Meadow Recreation Center participant<sup>12</sup>

- San Francisco’s Community Bridges Beacon Center, an afterschool program based at a middle school in the predominantly Latino Mission district, is helping inner-city girls overcome barriers to participation in sports. A 1995 survey found that girls made up for only 25 percent of youth sports in San Francisco and nearby Oakland. The survey also found that the rates of participation for Latina girls lagged far behind those of white girls. Last year, in partnership with three community organizations and with a grant from a local nonprofit, the Center established its first girls’ soccer team. Participation, though slow to start, has gained momentum.

*People say they’ve never seen this many girls in the Mission playing soccer...These girls are challenging stereotypes and cultural ideology.*

– Suzanne Sillet, coach for the Community Bridges Beacon girls’ soccer team.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> CBS News.com, “‘Shocking’ diabetes prediction,” posted on cbsnews.com on June 14, 2003. Downloaded on August 24, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, “Chronic Disease Overview,” last reviewed 8/17/04, <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/overview.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Parloff, Roger, “Is Fat the Next Tobacco?” *Fortune*, 3 February, 2003, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Physical activity levels among children aged 9-13 years” --United States, 2002. *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report*. 2003;52(33);785-788.

<sup>5</sup> Shepherd, Mike, “Class gets kids moving,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, 10 March 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The After-School Corporation, “Special Initiatives”, accessed 28 August 2004, [www.tascorp.org](http://www.tascorp.org).

<sup>7</sup> staff writer, “Metro Digest”, *The Providence Journal*, 17 June 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Girls Inc., “Programs,” 9 May 2002, <http://www.girlsinc.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Catalano R.F., Loeber R., McKinney K.C., “School and Community Interventions to Prevent Serious and Violent Offending,” *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, October 1999.

<sup>10</sup> San Antonio Sports Foundation, “Dreams for Youth,” accessed 28 August 2004, [www.sanantoniosports.org](http://www.sanantoniosports.org).

<sup>11</sup> Conchas, Edmundo, “Making good choices; youngster changing her life via gymnastics, dance and nutrition,” *San Antonio Express-News*, 2 June 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Ortega, Ralph R., “Students Climb to Success,” *Daily News* (New York), 25 March 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Ryan, Joan, “New goals for Latina athletes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 March 2004.