



By Karen E. Weber

HEALTHBEAT WRITER

The giggling told the story. Ten boys and girls doing jumping jacks and push-ups, and giggling all the while.

Kids on the Run, a youth fitness program in South Pasadena, doesn't believe that fitness has to be unpleasant. Fitness can be fun. The giggling proves their point.

The U.S. is suffering from an epidemic of sedentary, overweight children and teens who are expected to grow up into unhealthy adults.

According to a 2003-2004 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics, an estimated 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are overweight.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, statistics show that the percentage of overweight youngsters remained fairly stable in the 5 percent range. Between 1988 and 1994, that percentage doubled and has continued to rise in every survey since.

The increased availability of junk food and sedentary activities such as computer games and television are among the factors that contribute to this trend.

Kids on the Run is one of the programs that is battling this epidemic. It uses a two-pronged approach that emphasizes healthy food choices and enjoyable exercise.

Fitness director Daniel Torres helps children improve their fitness levels without getting injured.

"We provide a safe environment for kids to learn their own capacity for exercise," he said.

Running, strength training and calisthenics are part of the program, but

Daniel mixes up the activities, so they are fun and not a chore. One hot day in June, they were indoors, tossing around three balls of different weights – an exercise in hand-eye coordination that also provided some weight training. Daniel also brought in some soft, padded boxing gloves that made the boys' eyes light up. Sometimes they do drills at the park with a Nerf football. Racing to catch a long pass, the youngsters never think about the running they're doing.

"They're not aware they're exercising because it incorporates fun," said Wendy Crump, registered dietician and Kids on the Run coordinator.

"We try to mix it up," Daniel said. "We try to introduce them to all sports in a fun, non-competitive way."

He said Kids on the Run is adamant about finding age-appropriate fitness activities.

"It's suitable for the children's ages. We're not training body builders," he said.

Strength, flexibility and endurance are all included in the plan.

"In kids, their endurance capacity is untapped when they walk in here. When they leave, their output is sometimes doubled, or more."

He said in one class, no one could run a mile without stopping when they first started.

"Within two and a half months, they could run two and a half miles without stopping," he said.

The children also learn how to listen to their bodies. If they're jogging and start to feel tired, they know they can slow down to a more manageable level. They don't have to quit. They can continue at a level that's comfortable for them.

Though some of the youngsters go on to school and youth athletic programs, Daniel said the point of Kids on the Run is to improve fitness, not cre-

ate athletes.

"Even the kids who are picked last at sports can still find things they can do that are physical and still fun," he said.

In the other half of Kids on the Run, Wendy helps youngsters learn about healthy eating.

"The goal of Kids on the Run is improved overall health," she said. "Changing eating habits, healthy eating, healthy exercise habits. We help you incorporate an entire healthy lifestyle without feeling as if you're different."

Wendy doesn't issue orders to the kids, she helps them learn how to adopt healthier habits. The kids fill out a weekly food journal listing everything they ate at meals and for snacks. Wendy discusses it with them and asks them, "What do you think we need to cut back on?"

"This way, they have an awareness of the changes they need to make. It's important that they see it, not that I tell them," she said.

Wendy said children are always in a teaching situation at school and at home. People are always telling them what to do.

"This is more interactive. They're involved in the food choices. It empowers the child," she said.

Wendy's office is full of food containers that are used to teach children how to read food labels. She also invites them to bring in boxes of food that they normally eat.

"We look at it and see if it's a healthy food choice," she said.

She also shows them that labels can be misleading. One item may be called "low fat" on the front of the box, but what does the fat content say on the label? And every sugary breakfast cereal trumpets that it's "whole grain," but how many grams of sugar are in it? Is that really a healthy choice?

Wendy said when children have a better understanding of what's healthy and unhealthy; then they can make better choices.

Youngsters in the program help set their own goals and all successes are celebrated.

"You can measure success at many levels. A child who was drinking soda every day and now drinks it infrequently — that's a measurable difference," Wendy said.

Weight loss isn't the main point of the program, though it often happens when youngsters begin to choose carrot sticks over cookies.

High school student Lily is a success story by anyone's measure. A little more than a year ago, she was preparing to graduate from junior high.

"I thought, I'm going to high school and I'm going to be fat," she said.

Changing schools is scary enough without the added burden of being "different."

Though she wanted to change, Lily wasn't sure how.

"I definitely wanted to lose weight, but I didn't want help," she said. When her mother brought her to Kids on the Run, she wasn't sure about it. "I was sort of iffy at first. I wasn't used to exercising or eating right."

She wasn't sure she could do it, but by following weekly meal plans and exercising twice a week, she lost a pound right away and that motivated her to keep going. Now 15-year-old Lily is a lean athlete who swims and runs cross-country. It's hard to believe she lost 91 pounds in a year.

"It's funny because I always used to dread any kind of sport. I couldn't do it. It was too hard. Now it's what I love to do," she said.

She doesn't attend Kids on the Run regularly any more, though she stops by once in awhile to join the exercise class. She's absorbed their teachings, so that she hears Wendy's voice sometimes — usually when she slips up. What she hears isn't Wendy scolding, it's Wendy telling her OK, that's a little slip, let's get back on track now.

"I hear her voice when I'm being hard on myself," she said. "Learning to love yourself for whatever size you are, that's something I learned."



But you also have to recognize the size you are, Lily said.

"I never thought I was fat. I just ate a lot. Coming clean with yourself, that's important," she said. "I didn't know how important health was and exercise and eating right. It's so important for kids especially."

Martha, mother of one of the participants, said, "Kids on the Run has given my son Max a new perspective on fitness, food choices and portion control. He has been empowered to take control of his choices, knowing there will be consequences for his actions. Although it is not the goal, he has managed to lose weight in a very short amount of time by following Wendy Crump's program."

She said she also learned lessons from Kids on the Run and used them to benefit the whole family.

"Kids on the Run has given my son a great deal of confidence that has transcended all facets of his life. He feels encouraged to try harder in school, sports and at home because of this confidence. He feels good about himself and it shows in his eagerness to attend the Kids on the Run fitness class," Martha said.

Another mother, Sheila, started bringing her two sons to Kids on the Run because she thought they needed more exercise. They've been with the program about a year and she's noticed that they have more energy and they're more conscientious about what they eat. They plan ahead. If they're going to a friend's birthday party, they leave room in their planned meals for a piece of cake at the party.

"Physically they look better and they have a lot more energy," she said. "They have more confidence. They sleep well at night. They feel healthy, look healthy and feel good about themselves."

She said they really like Daniel because he makes exercise fun for them.

"He does cool things," Sheila said.

Fitness can be cool and good health can be fun. Those are two of the lessons that can benefit any family. Kids on the Run shows that learning to make healthy food choices and finding enjoyable ways to exercise can pay benefits in healthier, more energetic children.

Just listen to those giggles.

For more information about Kids on the Run in South Pasadena, call (626) 403-6000 or visit www.kids-on-the-run.com. For general information and helpful, downloadable pamphlets on nutrition, physical activity and weight control, visit the Weight-control Information Network, part of the National Institutes of Health, at win.niddk.nih.gov.

Kids Health Fair scheduled

Free immunizations and health screenings will be featured at a Kids Health Fair scheduled for 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday, Aug. 18, at Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center's Family Health Center, 1770 N. Orange Grove, Pomona.

The event will include free immunizations — while supplies last — and health screenings for children from 2 months to 18 years of age. Parents are advised to bring the child's immunization records to the fair. The

immunizations will be provided by Los Angeles County Public Health.

Health screenings will include blood pressure, height and weight, vision, hearing, dental health and a health review and referral service.

Free identification photos and fingerprinting will be available to the first 300 children.

Free refreshments will be provided.

For more information, call (909) 865-9129.