

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Youth Physical Wellness Information for School Clinicians

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.

Students who eat well and stay fit are more resilient than their peers who eat unhealthy food and live a sedentary lifestyle. When students 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 of students. By focusing on strengths and assets, wellness constitutes a positive approach to mental health in schools.

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?

- **Talk to students about the nutritional value of the food they eat.** First, ask students to keep a record of all the food they eat during a typical school day. Show students how to count calories by referring to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) label. Ask them to estimate the number of calories they consumed and to use this list as a starting point for discussion: Do they know what calories are? Do they understand the role of fat, carbohydrates, protein, and sodium?
- **Encourage students to engage 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 your school's physical education program.** Do physical education teachers clearly explain the short and long-term benefits of eating well and working out? While some students naturally gravitate toward sports as a creative outlet, other students may be less confident in their ability to perform physically. These students may need more incentive to participate in physical activity: they'll look better, they'll feel better, and eventually, they'll approach developmental milestones with a more proactive mindset. In order to help these students it is a

good idea to have a list of your school's clubs and intramural activities as well as extra curricular activities in the community.

- **Promote 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.
- **Ask administrators to promote wellness throughout the school.** See if it would be okay for you to post information about healthy eating habits around the entrance to the cafeteria. Try to also get a sense of the nutritional value of food served throughout the entire campus. Does it meet FDA guidelines for healthy student eating? If not, meet with the school administration to discuss a plan to improve the nutrition of campus food.

Helpful Forms and Handouts:

- National Education Association Health Information Network
 - *Promoting Resilience in an "At Risk World:" What Can Public Schools Contribute:* <http://www.neahin.org/programs/mentalhealth/promotingresilience.htm>
 - *Resiliency 101:* http://www.neahin.org/resources/docs/Resiliency_101_Slides.pdf.
 - *Violence in Communities and Schools: A Stress Reduction Guide:* <http://www.neahin.org/programs/mentalhealth/Stress-Guide.pdf>.
- 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). <http://www.mypyramid.gov/>.

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