

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Youth Physical Wellness Information for Teachers and School Staff

Background

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 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 children. By fostering the physical and emotional well-being of students, teachers and school staff 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 students.** Actions speak louder than words when it comes to promoting a healthy lifestyle. Try to gradually phase out some of the junk food you eat and replace it with healthier snack alternatives (e.g., dried fruit, multigrain bread). Also, consider replacing unhealthy classroom treats (e.g., candy bars, lollipops, etc) with healthier alternatives (e.g., pretzels, granola bars).
- **Talk to students about the nutritional value of the food they eat.** Show students how to count calories by referring to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) label on the back of most food items. Ask them to estimate the number of calories they consume each day and 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? Do they eat snacks from vending machines? Beginning a dialogue about healthy eating shows children the importance and value of wellness.
- **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. Also, 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. 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 classroom bulletin board.
- **Ask administrators about wellness in your child's school.** What sort of attitude does the administration have toward wellness? 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.

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>.
- 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:

Collis, M. (2000). Total teacher wellness. *WELL: Newsletter for Wellness*, 2(3). Retrieved March 8, 2006 from http://www.speakwell.com/well/2000_fall/articles/total_teacher_wellness.html.

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

*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.