

Let's get children moving toward a healthier future

By Andrew L. Yarrow

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WASHINGTON -- I struggled valiantly to climb ropes in my elementary school gym, survived hot September scrimmages in a heavy football uniform with a merciless coach and avoided prepubescent heart failure after hours of after-school tennis. And I was no athlete.

But those were the days when President John F. Kennedy spoke of a "vital link between physical fitness and national greatness" in 1963 and President Lyndon B. Johnson called children's physical fitness "a matter of national concern" two years later.

Today, screen-addicted, recess-and-PE-deprived, parent-chauffeured children inhabit a different world - one that is dangerous to their health and our nation's social and economic well-being.

In politically incorrect terms, too many of our nation's kids are fat and lazy. During the last two decades, the share of overweight and obese American children has doubled to nearly 30 percent and the proportion of obese U.S. children has tripled to 15 percent.

The costs of obesity are not only shorter, less-healthy lives but also higher economic costs of treatment and lower productivity and earnings in adulthood. Obesity-related medical problems include cardiovascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes, asthma, orthopedic complications and mental health problems.

No smoking gun accounts for the sharp rise in childhood obesity. Yet researchers in the policy journal *The Future of Children* point to possible causes such as excessive TV and computer time, an increase in fast food and unhealthy foods marketed to children and junk food offered at school, a growing number of working parents unable to cook nutritious meals or supervise active play, and a decline in physical activity as schools scale back physical education and recess and as safe places to play and exercise dwindle.

The decline in physical activity is particularly troubling. Many young Americans have become screen potatoes, glued to computer and video games and television. The Institute of Medicine recommends at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day for children, but only 6 percent to 8 percent of schools meet these standards. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls for 60 minutes a day of exercise for school-age children but reports that one-quarter of 9- to 13-year-olds engage in no "free-time physical activity."

The once-ubiquitous daily school gym class has become an endangered species. Only half of America's elementary schools require physical education, and only 5 percent of high school seniors must take PE.

The share of high school students attending daily PE classes fell from 42 percent to 28 percent between 1991 and 2003. Although the National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends daily recess through at least sixth grade, a stunning 29 percent of elementary schools schedule no recess.

The most widely fingered culprit for PE and recess cuts is the recent national obsession with improving standardized test scores. An argument could be made that physical activity during school helps kids to recharge their batteries for academic work.

Children's soccer leagues, Little League and other organized sports don't make much of a dent in the obesity problem, either. Many experts say what any Soccer Mom or Baseball Dad can see: Most leagues - unlike the neighborhood pickup games of yore - leave kids lurking on the sidelines waiting to occasionally kick or hit a ball.

Physical activity should be a no-brainer for a healthy, strong nation. It lowers the risk of weight gain and medical conditions associated with being obese or overweight. And you don't need a researcher to tell you that exercise improves mental acuity and psychological well-being.

Some states and localities, from Idaho to West Virginia, have introduced legislation to increase or mandate PE. The President's Council on Physical Fitness in 2002 called for Americans to be physically active every day, and Congress passed the Physical Education for Progress Act in 2000 to support schools in expanding PE activities. But schools, parents and policymakers must do much more.

Obesity threatens to overwhelm all other health issues in America. We must control what we eat and how much, but we also must get our children to expend more energy. In short, if we're going to avoid an unhealthier nation saddled with enormous obesity-related economic costs, we need to demand recess and effective physical education of our schools, and safe streets and playgrounds of our communities.

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