

Fitness PLUS

A clear, concise news feature that teachers can use in the classroom.

By Peter Landry

Active VERB program pushes fun and fitness for nation's kids

What do the following words have in common?

Jump. Stretch. Run. Walk. Move.

If you know your grammar, you know that those five words are verbs—and that verbs are action words.

Getting young people to become more active is the goal of a national fitness program that this summer celebrates five successful years of encouraging kids to live healthier lifestyles.

The program is called "VERB: It's What You Do."

In schools, recreation centers and homes, kids ages 9 to 13 are asked to pick one or more active verbs that fit their personality and interests.

The challenge then is to use those verbs—run, bowl, bend, sing or whatever—as a launching pad to become more active and involved at school and in the community.

Alone, with friends, or in classroom groups, students across the nation are turning "their" verbs into regular physical activity and developing healthy behaviors to last a lifetime.

"Our kids need to be kids and be active," said Tommy G. Thompson of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) when he first announced the program. "Our goal is to motivate and inspire our children to get active and involved—and to have fun doing so."

Students who are engaged and active physically, HHS notes, have

been shown to have greater confidence, self-esteem, discipline and school achievement, as well as stronger social connections.

Unfit nation

The VERB program, which has been promoted on TV and other media, takes on a problem that has been worrying health leaders more and more.

As a nation, Americans are not physically fit—and many are overweight. This is especially true of American children.

Consider these facts:

- The number of overweight adolescents 12-19 years old has almost tripled in the last 20 years.

- One-fourth of children spend four hours or more daily watching television.
- Only 27 percent of students in grades 9-12 engage in moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week.
- Three-quarters of 9- to 13-year-olds who are overweight or obese remain overweight in adulthood.

"We need to get our children away from the PlayStation and onto the playground," said Thompson, who now is considering a run for president after leaving HHS.

Small steps count

America's physical unfitness has a high cost—about \$117 billion in health care and other expenses, HHS reports.

Diseases related to inactivity or poor eating habits kill almost as many people as smoking—about 300,000 a year.

But small steps toward a more active lifestyle can make a difference, HHS says.

Just walking briskly for 30 minutes can improve fitness. So can taking the stairs instead of an elevator, or walking to the playground instead of asking for a ride, or traveling by bike, scooter or skateboard.

Pick a verb and pursue it. And remember what your English teacher said: Some verbs are passive, but active verbs are best.



A government program wants you to use your verbs—and your bodies!

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Activities

1. The VERB program seeks to encourage physical activity by building on things kids like to do. As a class, make a master list of verbs that represent activities you enjoy. Have each student pick three individual favorites from the list. Then create a bar graph to show favorite verbs of the class as a whole.
2. Search the newspaper for 10 verbs that represent physical activities. Use these verbs, along with photos and images from the paper, to create a newspaper public service ad promoting the VERB program. Make sure your ad has an attention-getting headline. Display and discuss the ads as a class.
3. Physical inactivity is just one health problem that makes news. Find another in the stories or photos in today's newspaper. Write a sentence stating what the problem is. Write a second sentence stating who the problem affects most. Write a third stating a possible solution and how it might be achieved.
4. Newspaper feature stories try to take readers inside the action, to make readers feel as if they were there. Go back to the master list of verbs that show what activities your class likes most. Use 10 of these words to write the first few paragraphs of a feature story about physical activities of students. Or use them to write a rhyme to read aloud to the class.



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Start of summer vacation offers a fitness challenge

Everyone looks forward to the start of summer vacation

After a long school year, kids want to relax, kick back and have fun.

But there can be too much of a good thing when it comes to vacation.

If kids relax too much, they can gain weight over the summer months.

And that's a new challenge.

With free time, summer snacks, TV and computer games, many students live less active and less healthy lives in summer than they do during the school year, according to health studies.

"A child can add five to 10 pounds over the course of summer," the Texas Children's Hospital reports.

"You can acquire a lot of bad habits in the summer," adds Susan B. Roberts, a weight loss expert at Tufts University.

The good news, Roberts told the WeightWatchers.com Web site, is that "making healthier changes is an ... adjustment you can combine with other changes" during the summer.

Around the country, there is growing concern about children getting too fat because extra body fat increases risks for diseases and adult health problems.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, more than twice as many children 6-19 are overweight today than were overweight 20 years ago. Among adolescents 12-19, more than three times as many are overweight.

More than two-thirds of adults are either overweight or obese (extremely overweight), the CDC reports.

In 2006, a national study reported that in 31 states the percentage of obese adults was higher than it was in the previous year.

In 13 states more than 25 percent of adults were obese, according to the Trust for America's Health, a group that works to increase funding for public health.

And not one state is making enough progress to meet the national goal of

reducing adult obesity to 15 percent of the population by the year 2010.

A challenge

One way students can become more active is to sign up for the "President's Challenge" program offered nationally by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

This newly expanded program offers kids an online roadmap for staying active—with prizes as incentives. At the Web site www.presidentschallenge.org, students find nearly 100 activities to choose from for exercise as well as easy ways to log time spent exercising.

Best of all, it explains why students benefit from 60 minutes of even moderate exercise five days a week.

Benefits

Regular exercise has many benefits. It can lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of illnesses such as Type II diabetes or heart disease.

It also can give people more energy, improve appearance and self-esteem, reduce anxiety and help manage stress.

"It's never too late to get more active," the President's Challenge program declares. "Every little bit helps. Start slowly and build gradually. The time to begin is now."



From rock climbing to bike riding, any kind of regular exercise can improve kids' health.

Best Youth Column Finalist, EdPress Education Excellence Competition

Activities

1. Health studies show too many Americans are overweight, inactive and increasingly unhealthy. Part of that is due to what people eat and part is due to how much exercise they get. As a class, discuss what kinds of things you like to eat for meals or snacks and what you like to do for exercise. Then talk about changes you could make in your diet and activities so that you could get more healthy foods and drinks and increase the amount of exercise you get.

2. Exercise is important to maintaining good health. Exercise also can be fun, if you approach it that way. Look through the photos, ads and stories in today's newspaper and pick out activities in which you could get exercise, but also have fun with friends or family at the same time. Make a poster or display ad for the newspaper showcasing some fun exercise activities you and other people could enjoy. Give your poster a lively title!

3. The study of obesity by the Trust for America's Health found that the five states with the highest obesity rates also had much higher rates of poverty than the national average. As a class, discuss reasons poverty could have a connection to obesity. Then write a short newspaper editorial suggesting helpful ways local, county or state governments could respond.

4. A big reason health experts worry about overweight children is that they are more likely to become overweight adults. Find a comic strip you like in the newspaper. Write a new episode in which the characters talk about ways to get kids to live healthier lives.

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