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Fitness grant could improve health, lives of local kids

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Too many overweight kids are on the fast track to health problems. It is about the only thing they are doing fast.

The answer is to make exercise and healthy eating part of their lives, not a chore. A \$35,000 grant to the Employers Coalition on Health from its national counterpart, the National Business Coalition on Health, will help accomplish a needed culture change. As many as 70 children ages 5 through 12 will be targeted for participation through a Winnebago County Health Department program that involves students from Beyer, Kishwaukee, Lathrop, Nelson, Haskell, Washington Gifted Program and King elementary schools.

The program is not new; it is an expansion of the Youth Fit For Life curriculum already being followed in YMCA of Rock River Valley activities, Rockford Park District summer programs and the YMCA's Camp Winnebago. The grant will help bring Fit For Life to kids' programming at the Blackhawk Boys & Girls Club, 330 15th Ave.

The charm of the program is it doesn't feel like something kids should do or have to do. If a counselor wants to teach a certain game or activity, the counselor does it with them. In a game of tag, for example, no child sits out after he or she is tagged. Kids constantly keep moving.

The approach makes sense, but there is research to prove it. Jim Annesi from the Metro Atlanta YMCA led a study evaluating more than 7,000 Rockford-area children who participated in Youth Fit For Life programs from 2007 to 2009.

The percentage of kids doing 150 minutes a week of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity increased from 54 percent in the first year of the project to 72 percent in the third year.

There were also gains in strength, flexibility and cardiovascular efficiency and reductions in body mass index, which uses height and weight measurements to estimate how much body fat a person has.

What the kids didn't tell the researchers is just as impressive.

Jan Jann, vice president of marketing and public relations for the YMCA of Rock River Valley, said the local participants talked about influencing their families' health choices as well. They talked about making fewer stops at McDonald's -- and, when they stopped, getting apple slices instead of fattier fare.

These aren't trivial lifestyle changes. They could be life-or-death. Obesity rates among children have tripled in the last 30 years. Troubling increases have been seen, too, in Type II diabetes and hypertension, conditions once thought of as adult problems. In Illinois, 34.9 percent of children 10-17 are overweight.

According to a post Wednesday on the Health blog of The Wall Street Journal, Medco Health Systems said spending on drugs for kids rose 10.8 percent last year. That's the

most of any age group and nearly triple the increase for the general population. Medco is a pharmacy benefit manager.

With that kind of spending in the balance, a \$35,000 grant sounds like a smart investment many times over.

Why kids aren't fit

Contributors to childhood overweight and obesity:

Food choices: Diets higher in calories, especially fats and simple sugars, and fewer fruits and vegetables.

Physical activity: A more sedentary lifestyle versus a physically active one.

Parental obesity and inactivity: Children of obese and sedentary parents are more likely to be obese and inactive themselves.

Eating patterns: Skipping meals, eating at irregular times or not eating as a family.

Parenting style: Parents who are overcontrolling about food choices tend to have children who have problems regulating their food intake.

Source: The Obesity Society at obesityusa.org