

What Parents Can Do to Promote Healthy Schools



Parents are Key

Our country has educated parents and students on the detrimental effects of smoking on child and adult health. Now it is imperative that we do the same to address US eating and physical activity habits - habits that are contributing to the rise in obesity and health-related problems of millions of America's children.

- Over the past 20 years, the prevalence of childhood obesity has risen to epidemic proportions. Today, 1 in 3 kids (33.6%) is at an unhealthy weight. 16.5% of kids are overweight and 17.1% are obese.
- Being overweight increases a child's risk of health-related problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers. Additionally, it can have a detrimental effect on a child's academic performance, emotional health, and self-esteem.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates a third of children born in 2000 will develop diabetes unless serious nutrition and exercise changes are made.
- In order to combat our national childhood obesity epidemic, we need to get kids moving more and eating better! Parents and schools are key in helping achieve this goal!

"A parent is a child's first and best teacher. A parent is a vital catalyst, a direction provider, a helper, and the first person a child turns to for tools and know-how. So, in the fight against childhood obesity, parent participation is absolutely essential."

Advocate for Healthy Schools

1. **Work with your PTA.** Encourage your school to develop and implement wellness policies related to physical education, physical activity, recess, nutrition education, and healthy food offerings at school. Volunteer!
2. **Assess your school's health.** Make sure you know how healthy your school's environment is and what needs to be improved. Use the "How Does Your School Rate" assessment tool in the CanDo School Wellness Resource Kit to assess your school's health.
3. **Speak up about the importance of physical education, physical activity, and recess.** Advocating for an increase in physical education, physical activity, and recess can have a big impact. Parents' concerns and ideas are valuable. Talk to your principal and other school leaders about the importance of incorporating at least 30 minutes (elementary) or 45 minutes (middle and high school) of PE run by accredited professional instructors into every school day. Talk about the importance of having adequate recess time and the promotion of physically active play during recess.
4. **Speak up about the importance of nutrition education and healthy food and beverage offerings.** Advocate for increased nutrition education and for healthy food and beverage offerings at all school functions and events, in vending machines, in the school store, and in classrooms. You can have a big impact on your child's school.
5. **Volunteer to help with physical activity events or sports at your child's school.** Become a part of your child's after-school physical activities, including walking and running clubs, sports teams, marching band, drama productions, etc.
6. **Talk to your child's teacher** about incorporating 10-minute aerobic physical activity breaks into the classroom.
7. **Encourage your child to participate in team sports or athletic programs.** Team sports and athletic programs may be sponsored by the school, community centers, parks and recreation organizations, and the university. Activities such as dance, basketball, soccer, biking, running, and swimming can dramatically increase your child's daily physical activity.
8. **Ask school leaders** about including information about the importance of PE, physical activity, recess, nutrition education, and healthy food and beverage offerings at school in communications with parents, such as the school newsletter.

Perception vs Reality

In 2005, Action for Healthy Kids conducted a national public opinion survey that was designed to understand parents' beliefs and expectations with respect to wellness practices in their children's schools. The survey uncovered a significant gap between parental perceptions and expectations, and reality. For example:

- 77% of parents support requiring daily PE that lasts at least 48 minutes for all kids, and 62% think their child's school is doing an "excellent" or "good" job in this area. In reality, only 6 to 8% of schools nationally (depending on grade level) provide daily PE.
- 70% of parents support restricting access to high-calorie, low-nutrient snack foods in schools, and half of parents think that their child's school is doing an "excellent" to "good" job in this area. In reality, the vast majority of schools allow students to purchase such foods during the school day.
- Parents think that schools are providing nutrition education to all students and they would like such education to be part of the core curriculum two days each week. In reality, the typical curriculum devotes only five hours a year to nutrition education, and such education is provided to only some, not all, grades.

Source: National Association for Sports and Physical Education. Parent's views of children's health and fitness. 2003.



Advocate (cont'd)

9. **Form a Walking or Biking School Bus.** Volunteer to organize a group of parents to walk or bike students to and from school. The City of Fort Collins has a 'School Pool' program - an online system that matches families who are interested in sharing a trip to school via walking or biking - and carpooling too! For more information go to www.fcgov.org/saferoutes/schoolpool.php.
10. **Help educate parents.** Ask school leaders about distributing information to parents in your school about the importance of PE, physical activity, recess, nutrition education, and healthy food and beverage offerings at school (the CanDo School Wellness Resource Kit has many handouts!).
 11. **Eat with the kids.** Go in one day and join kids at lunch (ask your school for permission first). Eat what the kids eat or pack a healthy lunch. Find out what choices are available at your school, and what they taste like. What do kids pick from the menus? How long do they have to wait in line? How much time do they have to eat? Do they have recess before lunch?
 12. **Help make school dining facilities appealing to students.** Take a look at your cafeteria. Is it a nice place to eat? Ask your kids what they think of the room. Is it dark or sunny? Are the seats comfortable? If the walls are drab, ask your school's art teachers to have students create artwork (featuring healthy foods) for the walls. Or ask your principal for permission to have a PTA painting party, and paint murals on the walls.
13. **Make sure your school participates** in the National School Meal Programs, including breakfast, lunch, and after-school snack programs. If your school does not participate in these programs, encourage school leaders to do so.
14. **Meet with the food service staff** at your school and learn about their daily challenges in preparing healthy meals and their suggestions for healthy improvements.
15. **Talk to students about the food at school.** Listen to kids' opinions about the time they eat lunch, whether they are rushed, what the food is like, and what they would like to see changed. It's important to get students' support for healthy changes in the school environment.
16. **Armed with all the information you have gathered, speak up about what changes are needed.** Enlist the help and support of your principal, the PE teacher, the school food service staff, teachers, and the PTA for making improvements in your school's nutrition, physical education, and physical activity environment. With the strength of these groups behind you, you can make a big difference and change your school for the better!

Source: National Parent Teacher Association (www.pta.org)

CanDo – Coalition for Activity and Nutrition to Defeat Obesity
Poudre Valley Hospital Foundation
1024 South Lemay Avenue | Fort Collins, CO 80524
Phone: (970) 495-7517 | ve2@pvhs.org
www.CanDoOnline.org

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