

## Let's get those kids walking

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It's been more than two years since I wrote, "Let's get kids walking toward healthy habits" in the July 29, 2008, Naperville Sun Sportsdoctor article. And it is encouraging to see some real attention to the childhood obesity epidemic (yes, epidemic!).

First lady Michelle Obama has taken on the problem with her "Let's Move" campaign, and organizations from the NFL to CNN have joined in the challenge. Area YMCAs, along with FORWARD (Fighting Obesity Reaching healthy Weight Among Residents of DuPage) launched a community-wide obesity education and prevention initiative at Naperville's Whole Foods Market this past weekend. Everything from nutrition to physical activities to parent education were stressed. Obesity, both in children as well as adults, is a topic that I've discussed on "the Sports Doctor" radio show with many experts for more than 10 years.

Just how big is the problem? Well, for starters, obesity has tripled over the past two decades in children between 9 and 16 years old, and adults don't fare much better. Three years ago, one of the largest studies of its kind showed that 90 percent of 9-year-olds get more than two hours of physical activity a day, but fewer than 3 percent of 15-year-olds do. This sharp drop of activity levels raises alarms about the lack of physical activity continuing into adulthood with all its significant health risks, including heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

I mentioned Sun fitness columnist Nicki Anderson in '08, quoting a study that said, "Treating children with obesity is three times more costly than the average child." Calculate that with these millions of kids, and you'll arrive at the scary fact that this crisis can break us financially as a society. Health care costs for all this will be impossible. Adults without children who think this doesn't affect them must understand that health insurance costs for all of us will reflect obesity-related illnesses.

Of course, we know that nutrition and eating habits are the other part of this two-headed monster. The fast food industry has buried us with advertising over the last few decades. Even the "regular food industry," with its processed foods and forever shelf lives hasn't done us any favors. That's why it's so important for groups like Whole Foods to get involved to give kids and adults better choices.

It's no secret -- we eat too much and don't include enough fruits, vegetables and nutritious foods. We've got to pay attention to this. This is included in any solution, whether it's for children or adults. In '08, I mentioned Sun Times columnist Sue Ontiveros, who wrote about "needing to get kids biking, swimming, walking, things that don't require teammates." Like me, she had problems with the short-sighted decisions to cut back daily gym classes by our legislators to save money.

Well, here is again what I know would be a major step toward a solution within a generation. It's called Let's Get-em Walking! It's a simple, national grass-roots school initiative: From kindergarten through 12th-graders, all who are physically able should participate in a 30-40 minute walk every day. No special equipment, no competition, indoors or outside. Just do it.

The walking doesn't replace other physical activities, but it would be the norm. A 15-20 minute health related topic could be included if time allows. The daily walks would not affect team sports and school athletes. This would stay the same, but all athletes should participate. It's for everyone.

Starting this habit of every day walking in early childhood and continuing it through high school would dramatically change the mess we're in over the next generation. Chances are good that this "walking habit" would continue throughout adulthood and influence the parents of the kids who walk as well. Only the schools, with their tens of millions of kids, have the numbers to significantly change these dismal statistics.

So, school officials, parents, coaches, and legislators, "Let's get-em walking." It will work.