

YOUTH FITNESS



Programs aim to make kids more active and reverse an alarming trend toward obesity

by Jim Gullo

AT THE AUBURN VALLEY YMCA JUST OUTSIDE OF SEATTLE, a group of 10 children stands in formation on the gym floor, holding jump ropes and watching their teacher intently. World rope-jumping champion René Bibaud is teaching them a new routine that involves whirling and skipping the rope simultaneously. When she does the routine, the rope sizzles through the air as she effortlessly executes a series of jumps and turns that looks more like dance than exercise.

“Are you ready?” she asks. “Do you have your goal in your mind? OK, let’s get started. If I call out a trick, do you have to try it? Yes! At least once.”

With music playing, she begins the routine and the kids begin to jump with her. One by one the children miss their jumps or get tired and stop, but one 6-year-old boy named Bryan stays right with her, jumping over and over for a full minute. “Great job,” calls out Bibaud. “Let’s try it again.”

Bibaud has been crisscrossing the country of late to teach her rope-jumping skills to children. “I like to introduce kids to rope jumping. It’s so portable, and it’s a lifetime fitness activity,” she says.

“The key is to find a physical activity that you truly enjoy.”

BIBAUD’S MISSION IS RESONATING THROUGHOUT SOCIETY as more and more parents look for help in getting their kids off the couch, away from the video games and back to activities that naturally keep them fit. Yet, the news from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about our national affinity for gaining weight could not be more deflating to parents. Obesity is on the rise in America, and one of the fastest-growing groups of people who are gaining too much weight, too quickly, is our children. According to a report issued last fall by the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics, the percentage of young people who are overweight in the United States has tripled since 1980—9 million young people, or 16

percent of the population, are now considered overweight and possibly headed toward obesity. Another 15 percent of children are considered to be at risk of becoming overweight, with Body Mass Indices for their age groups in the highest range. The problem is especially pronounced in children of color. More than 20 percent of black and Mexican-American adolescents are considered to be overweight, compared with 14 percent of non-Hispanic white children, with corresponding numbers for children ages 6 to 11.

The obesity issues that begin in childhood frequently carry over into the adult years, creating a lifelong pattern that winds up affecting public health in major ways. Obesity has been linked to serious adult health problems, from heart disease to diabetes to hypertension, and is now considered a leading cause of preventable death among Americans, rivaling smoking as a major risk factor. Experts are stressing fitness more than ever as



Do your kids spend too much time in front of the TV or complain about being bored? How about a few activity options?

- Basketball
- Biking
- Skating
- Dancing
- Soccer
- Swimming
- Tennis
- Volleyball
- Running
- Weight lifting
- Jump roping
- Boardsailing
- Badminton
- Wrestling
- Gymnastics
- Mountaineering
- Baseball
- Skateboarding
- Frisbee
- Football
- Surfing
- Racquetball
- Fencing
- Skiing

PARENTS

Who are the best motivators when it comes to urging children to get active? It's parents and families, of course. Public health officials all agree that public and private programs to encourage fitness have their place, but the best place for active lifestyles to start is in the home. Parents can take responsibility for their children's nutrition and fitness levels, and provide a role model for making fitness and exercise a lifelong activity. It can be as simple as going outside after dinner for a family walk or game of kick-ball, scheduling a period of time during the weekend for family exercise at the health club or local pool, or participating in youth sports as coaches and mentors. Family outings to go hiking, camping or skiing can resonate for a lifetime. Kids can even teach their parents a thing or two about making fitness fun with games such as tag or hide-and-go-seek that the whole family can enjoy. The key is to get out and get active. Make it fun, and fitness will follow.

COURTESY: ROPEWORKS



RENÉ BIBAUD IS A CHAMPION ROPE JUMPER TURNED ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH FITNESS.

a way to control obesity, with childhood fitness programs at the top of the list for establishing a lifelong habit of staying active and healthy.

As the CDC states on its Website, "Although one of the national objectives for the year 2010 is to reduce the prevalence of obesity among adults to less than 15 percent, current data indicate that the situation is worsening rather than improving."

The problem of obesity, both among adults and children, has many, many roots, and fingers can and do point at everything from television-viewing habits to junk-food marketing to societal fears of letting children play unsupervised. The solutions, however, almost always are simple: Children should be more active and eat healthier. Most of the programs designed to fight obesity focus on one or both concepts.

This brings us back to René Bibaud, a Seattle-based fitness expert who is making a career of reaching out to children with her personal story of fitness, hard work and success. This month alone, she will take her inspirational message to schools in Washington, Texas, Colorado and California, and later this fall she is scheduled to travel to the Middle East to speak and perform. Bibaud comes to her schoolwide assemblies and workshops armed with a simple but hugely effective piece of equipment: a jump rope. As a five-time world-champion rope jumper, she engages her youthful audiences with a combination of extraordinary rope-jumping feats and a call to get kids more active and motivated.

"I taught physical education in school and was struck by how often kids were unwilling to participate," Bibaud says. "They wouldn't try an activity if they couldn't be good at it right away. I took my experiences as a teacher and performer, and created a program that inspires kids to get involved."

Bibaud tells kids that when she was a fifth-grader at Helen Keller Elementary in Kirkland, Washington, she tried out for and did not make the rope-jumping team. Bob Melson, a physical education teacher, urged her to keep trying, and a year later, after hours of practice, she not only made the team but also became a rope-jumping star,

winning the American Double Dutch League championships from 1984 to 1987, and then again in 1995. She set world records for speed jumping, became an ESPN commentator and, at the age of 26, was asked to join a Cirque du Soleil show as a featured performer and rope-jumping coach. She helped choreograph a dazzling jumping routine and toured with the show *Quidam* for 4 ½ years before leaving to found Ropeworks, her company devoted to spreading the word of fitness through rope jumping.

For Bibaud, rope jumping has indeed become a lifelong activity. She stays in top shape with a fitness regimen that is literally wrapped around the rope. "Not a day goes by that I'm not physically active," she says. Her work with children is endlessly rewarding. Remember the little boy named Bryan who stayed with her jump for jump? After taking the class at the YMCA, he has begun to go to the garage with his sisters, turn the music on loud and practice rope-jumping.

MAKING EXERCISE FUN AND SCALED TO THE INTERESTS and abilities of kids is crucial to keeping children involved in an activity. With that concept paramount, a Mesa, Arizona, YMCA has invested heavily

in youth fitness and is beginning to see the benefits. The Mesa Y, which has more than 2,000 members, serves a broad area that includes a large, low-income and culturally diverse population. Thanks to a Bright Ideas Grant from the national YMCA, the Mesa chapter opened a Youth Fitness Center last March that features a line of exercise equipment from San Diego-based HOIST Fitness Systems Inc. Designed especially for children ages 9 to 14, rather than being scaled-down versions of adult equipment, the nine-piece KL exercise line combines thrill ride-like movements with minimal weight resistance. A pull-up station, for example, augments the child's strength and allows him or her to complete the pull-up, providing an "I can do it!" aspect to the exercise. A rowing-station seat moves with the child and mimics the motion of rowing. The HOIST equipment is similar in design to standard health-club fare, creating a starting point for kids and exercise that they can continue as they grow older.

"It's safe for kids, and it's fun," says Jan Hertzfeld, health and fitness director for the Mesa Y. "We keep them moving, with a minute spent on each machine as they complete the whole circuit. Our summer-camp kids can use it. Our after-school kids use it. Instead



of sitting down, they're exercising. And it's in their own room, where they can be while Mom and Dad are working out [in the adult fitness areas]."

To go along with the weight-training equipment, the Mesa Y has also installed a line of Game-Bikes, which are exercise bicycles connected to video-game monitors. Built by Cateye of Osaka, Japan, the bikes are connected to Sony Playstation 2 consoles and can interact with any number of racing and pursuit games. The child hops on the bike and begins to pedal in order to interact with the game. As Hertzfeld points out, "No pedal, no play. The kids love it." She reports that the Game-Bikes have become some of the most popular equipment in the Y. The concept has caught on in the Phoenix area: Since the Mesa facility opened its Youth Fitness Center, three more YMCAs in the area have opened similar centers that serve the needs of even more children.

FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT officials are all too aware of the grim statistics on childhood obesity and activity. They fund and create programs to promote fitness, but in the face of severe shortfalls in government budgets in recent years, agencies tend to focus on promoting healthy lifestyles and informing the public of trends and programs related to fitness. In California, for example, where the governor is heavily involved in fitness, both personally and professionally, a "Governor's Challenge" urges residents to sign up for an "Active CA" membership card, to participate in daily workouts and log results on the Website of the California Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (www.activeca.org). The site also contains a host of resources to steer people toward fitness programs.

NUTRITION

Good nutrition is as vital as exercise. Healthy children need to balance physical activity with nutritional needs and a diet that doesn't provide excess calories. Following are a few of the fundamentals for children excerpted from "Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005," published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As part of a healthy diet, children and adolescents should consume grain products often, with at least half of that being whole grains.

Children 2 to 8 years of age should consume 2 cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products. Children 9 years of age and older should consume 3 cups per day.

Children should eat a variety of fruits and vegetables, including all five vegetable subgroups—dark green and orange vegetables, legumes (dry beans), starchy vegetables and others.

Keep total fat intake between 30 percent and 35 percent of total calories for children 2 to 3 years of age and between 25 percent and 35 percent for ages 4 to 18, with most fats coming from sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, such as fish, nuts and vegetable oils.

"Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005" is available in PDF format at www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines.

In Washington, D.C., the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports—an advisory council whose presidentially appointed members include baseball great Nomar Garciaparra and Hall of Fame golfer Nancy Lopez—issues bulletins and information calling for increased activity for all Americans. The Surgeon General reports that only half of the young people in America ages 12 to 21 regularly participate in vigorous physical activity, and one-fourth engage in no vigorous physical activity at all. Because children spend so much of their time in school, the council recommends increased funding in physical education, but notes that only 32 percent of high school students have daily phys-ed classes, a decrease from 42 percent in 1991, and only 25 percent of high schools require students to have daily physical activity.

Many state agencies are concerned about the numbers, but they often face funding roadblocks in their legislatures. In Oregon, for example, the Oregon Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity recently promoted a bill in the legislature that would have required physical-education classes for elementary- and middle-school students, but the bill was heavily revised and did not pass. According to John Chism, at the Oregon Department of Human Services' Physical Activity and Nutrition Program, the department works with many partners on programs that address childhood obesity. For instance, the Womens Infants and Children program encourages mothers to breastfeed their newborns: Research shows that breastfed children are less likely to become obese. The agency also works with schools and communities to promote participation in the International Walk to School campaign. Set for the week of October 3, the campaign urges schools and families to organize programs for having kids get to school under their own power, as a way to increase physical activity. Similarly, California parents can access a host of ideas and strategies for getting their kids to safely walk or bike to school through the California Walk to School Headquarters Website at www.cawalktoschool.com.

Walking and biking to school seem to be deceptively simple solutions to a complicated societal problem such as childhood obesity, and they hark back to simpler times when children spent a majority of their nonschool time playing outside. So what can a parent do to allow a child safe and structured

play? One solution that many families are embracing is golf, where children who have the interest and ability to play, coupled with knowledge of the rules and etiquette of the game, can enjoy a four- to six-hour outside activity that includes as much as seven miles of walking over an 18-hole course. Junior golf programs have become popular—so much so that Oki Golf, a golf-course development firm in the Seattle area with seven championship courses, has seen sales shoot up for a junior player card that discounts greens fees.

“There's always a big demand for camps and clinics when we offer them, too,” says Nancy Cho, the president of Oki Golf. “What's nice about golf is that anyone can play it. In golf, you're competing against yourself. It's more of a life choice.”

To that end, The First Tee organization, founded in 1997 by the World Golf Foundation in Florida, has become a powerful advocate for teaching the game and its core values to children throughout the country, with an emphasis on bringing golf to underprivileged children. With 172 chapters in 209 locations nationwide, The First Tee (www.thefirsttee.org) is already making an impact on thousands of children who are taking up the game of Tiger Woods and Annika Sorenstam.

“I see a lot more kids playing golf, and they're from diverse backgrounds,” says Gordy Graybeal, the director of golf for the Seattle chapter of The First Tee. “When I grew up, the kids who played golf were from private country clubs. Now you get a lot of kids playing in the public sector.”

The founders of The First Tee recognized two key things about the game and children when they created their educational program: Golf is a tough game to learn under any circumstance. “Every year as many people quit golf as start it,” Graybeal points out. Young players need to have the tools not only to hit shots and make putts, but also to deal emotionally with the challenges of golf. Also, golf is inherently a game of values. The golfer is playing more against himself or herself than against the opponent or the



RESOURCES

AMERICAN OBESITY ASSOCIATION

www.obesity.org

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/

ROPEWORKS

www.jumpropenet.com

CALIFORNIA GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL FITNESS AND SPORTS

www.activeca.org

CALIFORNIA WALK TO SCHOOL HEADQUARTERS

www.cawalktoschool.com

THE FIRST TEE

www.thefirsttee.org

HOIST SYSTEMS

www.hoistfitness.com

CATEYE GAMEBIKES

www.cateyefitness.com/gamebike

course, and honesty and sportsmanship are woven into the fabric of the game.

For those reasons, a First Tee program of nine lessons emphasizes such qualities as “tips to keep your cool,” respect for the rules and understanding your own “personal par” as a measure of your success with each round of golf. “We try to seamlessly integrate golf and life skills,” says Graybeal. “We try to help them become good people whether or not they become good golfers.” For a fee of \$30 a year, with scholarships available, kids can join the organization and participate in lessons, clinics and events such as last summer's Wal-Mart First Tee Open at Pebble Beach, which invited a group of First Tee graduates to play the famed course on the Monterey Peninsula. The organization has also attracted influential supporters: At last month's Boeing Greater Seattle Classic, a Champions Tour event held at the TPC Snoqualmie Ridge course, a “Swing for Kids” fund-raiser had teams donating as much as \$3,000 per foursome to play a round to benefit the program.

Is golf the answer to a growing obesity problem among our country's youth? It's just one of many activities parents can choose for their children to become more active in a fun, safe environment. Keeping children physically fit may not be as simple as sending a kid outside to play, but opportunities for higher levels of activ-

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ity are nonetheless there. Resources for stemming the trend of obesity and getting children on the right track for a lifetime of healthy living are greater than ever. ▲

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