

## healthy kids

# Start Healthy Habits Early and Keep Them for a Lifetime

By Carrie Smoot

**M**uch has been written and broadcast about the obesity epidemic in this country, and how it's affecting everyone, including children and teens. At Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters (CHKD) in Norfolk, VA, dietitian Mary Jo Haney says parents and children have to be on the same page before a healthier diet high in fiber, fruits and vegetables will work for the entire family. "Since a person with a disability is often sedentary, once that person becomes overweight, it's very hard to reverse that trend," Haney says. Even so, she says, it's up to parents to let kids know when special treats are OK. For teens, it may be useful to keep a food diary—recording not just what they ate but why they ate it, causing them to think about their choices.

The following is an interview with CHKD physical therapist Michelle Nottingham.

**Q:** *How can a physical therapist help a family design an exercise program that is most effective and fun for young people with disabilities?*

**A:** A physical therapist is able to evaluate a child's specific limitations in flexibility, strength, and endurance and can design an exercise program that targets that child's specific limitations. For example, a child with cerebral palsy might have tight hamstrings and hip flexor muscles. Therefore, the child and parent would be taught correct stretching techniques for those muscles. A pediatric physical therapist is able to design a program that is both fun and therapeutic for children. For example, if children need to build strength in their legs by doing a squat exercise, the child can squat to the floor to pick up toys or a ball and then stand back up to throw the ball. Therefore, the child is "playing" but also performing exercises to build strength.



**Q:** *What lifestyle changes do you suggest most often?*

**A:** We suggest increasing physical activity in general. For example, if a child cannot ride a regular bicycle, using an adaptive tricycle/bicycle is recommended for general cardiovascular fitness. Or, if a child cannot walk by him/herself, we recommend walking with a walker, gait trainer, or crutches. Also, specific exercises for flexibility and strengthening are suggested for those areas in which the child has weakness. It is important that these exercises be performed initially with a physical therapist or exercise professional to make sure that the child is in good biomechanical alignment to prevent injury or over-use problems.

**Q:** *How do you evaluate fitness levels accurately for kids with disabilities?*

**A:** As physical therapists, instead of focusing on general fitness levels, we focus on teaching a child to perform a functional task with independence and increasing their overall mobility.

**Q:** *Please describe what adaptations in movements/ exercises you would make for various disabilities.*

**A:** For a child with cerebral palsy, we would make adaptations to accommodate their functional level. If a child can't stand up by himself or [walk], then maybe he or she can do exercises sitting or lying down, or standing up in their walkers. Also, if a child can't stand up, he or she can perform exercises in a pool, where the buoyancy of the water helps him or her to stand up.

If the "problem" is a neurological problem (CP, brachial plexus injury, or stroke), then movement cannot correct the original disability. But exercises to address active range of motion and strengthening will help to increase that person's ability to move.



**Q:** *Do you know of any adapted sports programs in Norfolk and other parts of Virginia?*

**A:** Blaze Sports with Virginia Beach Parks and Recreation department (757-471-5884) offers wheelchair basketball and wheelchair tennis. Also, SMART, Inc. (757-249-3319), located in Newport News, offers programs including martial arts, gymnastics, power lifting, cheerleading and dance, and swimming classes for special needs individuals, 2 years old and older. [See Recreation articles on pgs. 68 and 73 and Recreation resources on p. 99 for more information.]

**Q:** *Finally, how does weight gain/overweight/obesity affect the selection of a motorized or manual wheelchair?*

**A:** "Kids with disabilities are no different than anyone else when it comes to turning to food to deal with problems, or liking junk food," says Kellie Cochran, lead adapted physical education teacher for Fairfax County Public Schools. As she travels from school to school, she sees a lot of kids with disabilities struggle with overweight and obesity.

"These kids are often sedentary and therefore less physically active



because of the implications of their disability. Parents have so much to deal with regarding their children's health and physical needs. Sometimes eating healthfully and exercising are not on the top of the list of priorities."

But the best thing families can do, Cochran says, is to move as much as possible, especially the family member with a disability. If children are able to propel their wheelchairs independently, then they are encouraged to use a manual wheelchair and manipulate the wheels (push) themselves, if possible. When playing sports and games, adapt the rules slightly or modify the equipment to make the experience as safe as possible. Unless contraindicated, strength training is important. Resistance bands and isometric exercises are good alternatives. Swimming is fun, says Cochran, and may make it easier for people to move in the water because of the buoyancy. Try various options so you won't get bored, she says. The important thing is to get moving — and enjoy it! ■



*The author is a Northern Virginia freelance writer who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair.*

## *Resources and General Information*

### **The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability**

*Information about adaptive sports, adaptive exercise programs, videos and equipment, and recreational activities. Conferences, events and meetings are also available.*

[www.ncpad.org](http://www.ncpad.org), or 1-800-900-8086 V/TTY

### **The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities**

[www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/disabilities](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/disabilities)

### **www.SmallStep.gov**

*A Web site from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services about healthy living for kids, teens and adults.*

### **Mayo Clinic**

[www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)

### **American Dietetic Association**

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

### **Escape from Obeezcity**

*A family health program to combat childhood obesity.*

[www.obeezcity.com](http://www.obeezcity.com)

