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Lesson fit for summer

It's time for parents to take the lead in keeping children active and well-nourished

JOE MILLER, Staff Writer

Bryce Keeler is likely to have a healthy summer, if he can just keep from breaking something.

"Bryce!" yells Dorothea Brock, who spots the 9-year-old halfway across the playground on the slide. He's scaling the outside tubing of the enclosed structure, using the rib joints much like a mountain climber scaling a rockface. It's Thursday, midway through the weeklong Healthy Habits Camp at the Alice Aycock Poe Health Center in Raleigh; of the curriculum covered thus far -- on nutrition, on physical activity, on dental health -- proper slide usage apparently has yet to be addressed.

Maybe not to Brock, a health instructor at Poe, but the go-go Bryce appears the epitome of summer living, kid style. Or, perhaps, summer living as it used to be.

A study published in April in The American Journal of Public Health found that the body mass index -- roughly the measure of one's fat -- actually rose during the summer for the 5,000 kindergartners and first-graders studied.

Those findings seem surprising at first glance. Summer, after all, is the time when kids are let loose from the classroom -- a classroom increasingly diminished of physical activity -- to play at will.

But it's also a time when parents assume full responsibility for their kids' days, whether it's ensuring that they get out into the sun or letting them stay inside with their face stuck in a screen.

Bryce Keeler's dad, Jeff, takes the former approach.

By nature, Bryce is highly active ("That's one way to put it," says his dad). He's also susceptible to that modern-day deterrent to healthy living: screen time.

"He's never been much into television," Keeler says. Video games are another matter.

"We had to cut those out a few years ago."

And the computer?

"We had a recent incident," says Keeler. "He's restricted to an hour a day this week."

But Keeler tries to ensure Bryce doesn't notice he's been restricted by otherwise occupying the rising Holly Springs fifth-grader's time. In addition to the weeklong camp at Poe, Bryce is enrolled in various other active camps this summer. On weekends, Bryce and his dad hike, fish, ride bikes, go to the pool.

Keeler's involvement as a parent is key, those who work with kids agree.

"I don't think that the kids will model a behavior unless they see their parents doing it," says Alisa Wright Colopy, founder of Cary-based Fit & Able Productions, which sponsors a variety of activities intended to get parents and kids active, together.

"Unless the parents put a value on it, the kids won't."

In other words, don't take your kids to the pool and stay dry with a book. Jump in.



Camp docent Ana-Marie Azor hoists camper Avery Anderson to reach the handle of a zip line in Playwell Park at the Poe Center in Raleigh.

Staff Photo by Robert Willett

Go together

Motivating your kids shouldn't be that hard, says Natalie Newell, program coordinator for Rex Healthcare's Fit Kids program.

"You don't have to do very much to get them active," says Newell, who is also a dietitian. "But you do have to do a lot to keep their attention. They're constantly wanting to be stimulated."

To that end, she suggests parents emulate the Fit Kids program, a one-hour exercise class offered in lieu of day care for Rex health club members. They do "Simon says" exercises, running drills involving cones, play basketball, soccer, jump rope -- all in short spurts.

"I think about 10 minutes per game tends to work," Newell says.

A more organized option is the Families in Training program offered by Kids in Training. The latter is a nonprofit begun in 2003 to get kids active.

"We go mountain climbing, hiking in Umstead, canoeing at Lake Crabtree," says KIT founder Maylene Jackson of the program.

"This is not a child drop-off," Jackson stresses. "Families come out together."

Not that you have to take the family on a daylong hike in 90 degree heat.

"It doesn't have to be a strenuous activity," says Robert Netzel, a spokesman with BeActive North Carolina, a state-run program that encourages activity for all ages. "You just need to create a sense of motion.

"We're trying to establish key habits at a young age," adds Netzel.

Good eating, too

Those key habits include eating better. Summer, says Diana Koenning, a nutritionist with WakeMed, is a good time to tweak those habits -- and perhaps lose some excess weight.

"The thirst mechanism tends to kick in more and makes us want more foods containing water," says Koenning.

The good news is that those water-rich foods tend to be fruits and vegetables. Also, water takes up space, giving us what nutritionist Barbara Rolls bases her "Volumetrics" eating plan on: losing weight through a sense of fullness.

Still, just as maintaining a mix of activities is key to keeping your kids happily on the move, mixing up their diet in fun and tasty ways is important, too.

That's where the mom in Dorothea Brock surfaces. Brock has an 11-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter, both of whom attend camp. Brock likes to vary the lunches she packs for them.

A favorite treat is frozen peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The peanut butter is a good source of protein and she only uses jelly with no sugar added. Freezing them -- you can buy them pre-assembled and frozen at the store -- means they'll taste better come noon on a hot summer day. (Brock cuts the sandwiches into fun shapes.)

Leftovers can also be good, especially finger foods. Hot wings are a favorite with her kids, chicken tenders (baked and with minimal breading) are good, too.

You needn't avoid the popular kids foods altogether. Brock doesn't hesitate to toss a bag of chips -- the baked kind -- into her campers' bags.

Avoid, she urges, the temptation to cater to convenience. Here, she's referring to prepackaged lunches such as Oscar Mayer Lunchables. Lunchables have been criticized for their high caloric and sodium content. The Hot Dogs with Capri Sun and Chocolate Coins, for instance, contains 449 calories and 859 milligrams of sodium (36 percent of your daily allowance).

Simple things can make a difference, Brock says. It's just a matter of getting into the habit.

"It can be a challenge. But I think parents can definitely take advantage of summer to build healthier habits."

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