

NEW-LIFESTYLES STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOUSM STUDENT BEHAVIOR FACTS

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When it comes to shaping a student's behavior in order to effect a change in their current lifestyle, it is important to remember that changing behavior is a process, not an event. Changing a behavior unfolds over months and years, and maintaining the new behavior can be a lifelong effort. It's not going to happen overnight—so patience and perseverance are essential!

Generally, a new behavior must be repeatedly practiced over a significant number of days in order to help it become a habit. Requiring little conscious thought, a habit is something we do automatically and incorporate into our daily routines and lifestyle.

Physical educators and other health and fitness professionals across the U.S. are charged with the mission to help kids fight the current childhood obesity epidemic.

Finding themselves on the front lines, physical educators are arming themselves with information and strategies to inspire and impart change among their students. Here are some things to consider when striving to re-shape behaviors, like out-of-control amounts of TV watching and calorie-dense food consumption, found in today's sedentary youth.

The first key ingredient in shaping behavior is awareness.

Educate students about the importance of changing their current unhealthy behaviors. Spell out and explain the consequences of an unhealthy, sedentary lifestyle in an age-appropriate way that students can understand. If they have questions, support your advice with evidence and answers.

Allow students to practice making some decisions by giving them acceptable choices.

Empowering students to make their own good choices strengthens their self-esteem. Encourage kids to experience consequences and benefits of their actions/choices in order to improve their self-discipline and independence.

By giving them the tools to make good decisions, physical educators pass along to students the ability to be independent and to make good choices. Striving for the goal of creating well-adjusted, healthy and independent kids, educators should teach students how to problem solve. In reality, many of the opportunities students have to make choices occur outside of school. Teaching students to problem solve prepares them to make an informed decision regarding their health and wellness and may help them to choose fruit over candy bars and shooting hoops over watching TV.



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Allow students to practice making some decisions by giving them acceptable choices.

Positive reinforcement is essential!

Catch kids making good choices and praise them for making these healthy choices. Behavior that is rewarded, affirmed and reinforced tends to be repeated. Sometimes, parents and teachers get in the habit of expecting good behavior, so they ignore it when students do the desired behavior and notice only when they are not doing what is expected. Kids can never be given too much positive reinforcement. If you don't give it to them, they might not be getting it from another source.

Make sure the message encouraging good health is consistent.

If your school is starting a campaign for healthy eating and increased physical activity, make sure this message is clear and consistent throughout the school. Market your healthy message throughout the school, district and PTA. The message should become as evident in the classroom as it is in an extra-curricular or after-school program. Work to prevent contradictions and mixed messages that students will immediately recognize, as these contradictions will kill the credibility of your campaign. Simply stated, don't allow your school to eliminate vending machines with sodas and candy and then at the same time, promote fundraising activities for the band or athletics that sell candy and sodas.

Parents are the ultimate role models, and home is an influential environment.

Partner with parents to support realistic, non-threatening and culturally-sensitive rules for TV viewing and

healthy eating in the home. Place good information regarding health, nutrition and the role of physical activity into the hands of the parents. Educate parents that high sugar, calorie dense foods marketed for their convenience, low cost and long shelf-life are not less expensive than fresh, healthy options when you consider the few nutrients and health benefits they provide.

Stimulus control plays an important role in modifying behavior.

An individual's behavior is greatly influenced by the environment. Initially, when working to modify a behavior, eliminate the problematic stimuli in order to reduce the temptation to sabotage efforts to change behavior. In other words, students won't be tempted to eat cookies if there aren't any around for them to consume.

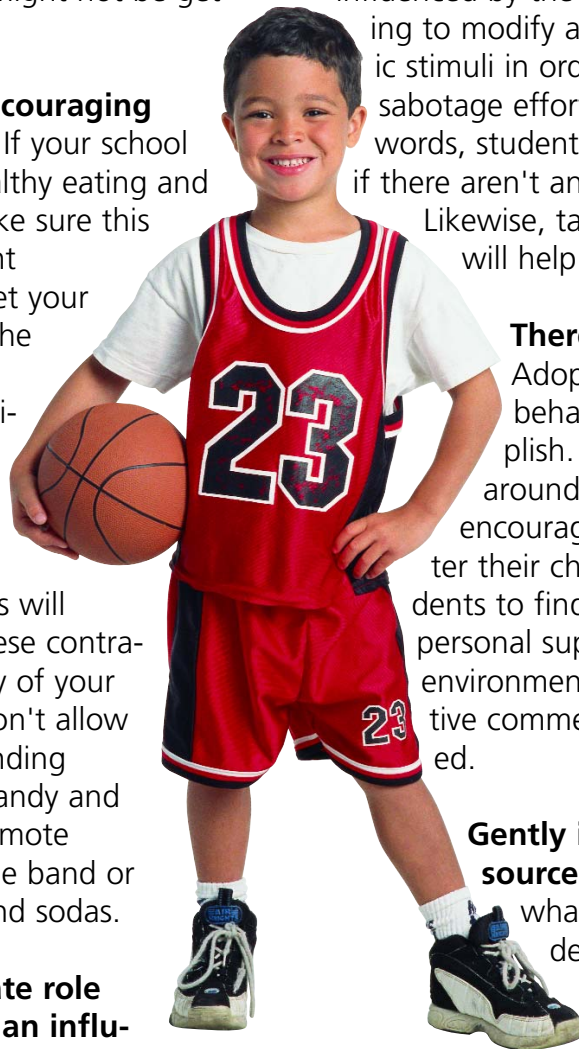
Likewise, taking the TV out of kids' bedrooms will help them to watch less television.

There is strength in numbers.

Adopting a new lifestyle and modifying behavior are not easy tasks to accomplish. The more support students have around them to cheer them on and encourage them when they falter, the better their chances of success. Talk with students to find out who can be a part of their personal support system. Create a positive environment in the classroom in which negative comments and put-downs are not tolerated.

Gently investigate and get to the source of the behavior.

Sometimes, what is triggering the poor behavior is deeper than a student's love for junk food and computer games. Try to recognize and address underlying emotional issues behind unhealthy behaviors. Be ready with school and community resources with which to refer students who may need counseling or other support.



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