

Engaging Families in Health and Wellness

Tips to help get families involved with youth health and wellness

These tips are based on the fundamentals of engaging family in learning – with a twist of wellness!
Through small changes at your youth center or school we can create a healthier community.

Create the Climate

- ▶ Creating an environment where families feel welcome is the most important factor in successfully engaging families and getting them to partner in efforts to improve health and wellness. Families need to feel welcome and informed about how to get involved.
- ▶ Welcome families and make them feel valued and satisfied (i.e. orientation for new families, parent meetings, invitations to the class room, suggestion boxes, consistent communication, and acknowledgement of contributions).
- ▶ Encourage staff to work collaboratively and respectfully with families. Organize neighborhood tours for staff to get to know families and the neighborhoods they live in.
- ▶ Work with families to create a 'job description' of an involved family member and provide them with specific opportunities to be involved. Make sure to let them know how they can be involved in supporting the health of their children.
- ▶ Communicate your organization's wellness policy, so that parents know you value their child's health (highlight important messages from the policy on your bulletin board once a week, in newsletters, etc.)

Extend Health & Wellness at Home

- ▶ Initiate learning activities for families to do at home with their children. Many health activities can be designed so the whole family can learn!

- ▶ Park or Trail Reviews: Assign families with the task of visiting and reviewing a park, or trail. How *walkable* is it? Would it be a good place to bicycle? What was fun to do at the park? Why is it healthy to visit a park?
- ▶ Collective Recipes: Assign families with the task of bringing in one ingredient for a healthy soup, or fruit salad. Explanation of the assignment can address nutrition and cooking.
- ▶ Games: Send home instructions for an active game like hopscotch, soccer or Frisbee golf; or families can come up with their own game. They can learn math by keeping score and the whole family will get active.
- ▶ Nature Art: Assign an art project where families must create a picture from items found in nature, leaves, sticks, feathers, etc. Explanation of the assignment can address physical activity and getting active outdoors.
- ▶ Little Chefs: Assign families to cook one meal together and review their family 'restaurant'. Was the food good? Where did the food come from? Who grew the food? Was the food healthy? How did the food make us feel? You may also do this for a meal eaten out.

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- ▶ **Media Review:** Have families pick an article from a media source (TV, radio, magazine, on-line or newspaper) on a wellness topic. Ask families to review the article and talk about it. Was the information in the article reliable? Were the authors trying to sell something? Why is this article important to wellness? Describe how you will use the information to improve your health.

Create a 'take home' wellness message for each activity so families will consider incorporating more wellness at home. For example, 'consider cooking a healthy meal together once a week', 'find a new trail to hike once a week', or 'discuss an article about wellness once a week'.

Have families document their wellness activities with pictures, drawings, reports, etc. Exhibit these at your site or in the community in order to highlight family experiences and reinforce the message that family participation in health and wellness is important and appreciated.

Communicating with Families about Health and Wellness

- ▶ Ensuring good communication with families will strengthen the family and help families feel more involved. Make sure to incorporate wellness into your messages! Use all communication with parents as an opportunity to share your organization's wellness policy and educate about wellness and the correlation with learning.
- ▶ Create a family resource room or space where families can get wellness resources, healthy recipes, activities to do with kids, wellness tips, ideas for healthy lunches, among other information.
- ▶ Use e-mail or written newsletters weekly or monthly to address various topics. Have one section of your newsletter dedicated to health, nutrition and physical activity.
- ▶ Communication boards like dry-erase, chalk or bulletin boards can be helpful in communicating information and reminders to parents. Highlight the 'healthy snack' that was served, a recipe of the week, a tip for healthy lunches on or off campus, or how many calories you would burn doing a specific activity with your child for 15 minutes.
- ▶ Coffee with the captain – Whether this is the principal, director, teacher or other official. Create frequent, yet scheduled, opportunities for parents to talk with the leader of your organization, like a weekly coffee meeting in the early morning. Each meeting may have a theme, like nutrition in the school, physical activity, etc.

Engage Families about Health and Wellness On Site

- ▶ Whether you are in a class room, a gym, or other location – invite your families to join you. Find volunteer opportunities on-site to engage parents and plan health related activities while they are there. Role modeling is a powerful tool in behavior change, and when parents see a ‘healthy’ classroom, they may make changes towards a ‘healthy’ home.
- ▶ Put volunteer opportunities into writing and include specific details. Families are more likely to commit if they know the details and what is expected of them.
- ▶ Have parents help with snacks, meals or special celebrations with food and incorporate education about wellness and nutrition.
- ▶ Whether you are teaching math, sports, reading, or knitting... Incorporate messages about wellness so that parents can see wellness modeled.
- ▶ Have parents work on assembling a healthy recipe book with the help of the kids.
- ▶ Have parents come to your site and help with a community garden.
- ▶ Promote healthy fundraising events such as: walk, trike or bike-a-thons, book reading contests, car washes, fruit stands, talent shows, have local chefs or restaurants donate healthy food for events, or healthy soup cook-offs.
- ▶ Model healthy reward systems while parents are present. For example, instead of rewarding with candy or food, reward with play time, non food rewards, or special time with a teacher or leader.

Involve Families in Wellness Policy and Practice

- ▶ Assess families' opinions and involve them in the decision making groups of the organization. Create opportunities for all families to provide input on wellness policies and practices.
- ▶ Invite families to meetings or groups where wellness policies are discussed. If you don't have a wellness committee, consider creating one, or ask current committees to address wellness.
- ▶ Ask for feedback on school wellness policies through surveys, interviews or conversations.
- ▶ Make parents feel welcome in the decision making process. Encourage and recognize suggestions from families and parent initiated policy change.
- ▶ Educate parents about the policy change process in your organization.

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