

## Obesity Research Gives Kids a SPORT-ing Chance

Stephanie, a fifth grader at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School, speaks fondly of a research-based program that she participated in last year. She is an active child playing kickball and dodge ball at recess, but didn't feel she was active as she should be. That has changed since her participation in SPORT.

SPORT (School Partnership for Obesity Research and PrevenTion) is a research-based program headed by Dr. Judith Weber of the Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE). SPORT is a walking program funded by a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant awarded to Dr. Weber in 2005. Dr. Weber and her research team (CARE staffers Kitty Szeto, Debra Watkins, Heather Logan, and Erica Russell) have implemented this school-based intervention program with third- and fourth-grade students at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School, neighboring the ACH campus.

SPORT provides pedometers to allow the students to track the number of steps they walk each day. The students were encouraged to walk at least 10,000 steps daily, and they turned in their weekly walking logs. The steps walked are recorded for each classroom and are posted outside the MLK school cafeteria. The class tally moves the students along a virtual tour of the United States. At each tour stop, SPORT is tied to geography and history lessons prepared by the teacher. SPORT awards its rotating trophy to the MLK classroom with the most steps each 9-week period. Students also receive ribbons and individual awards, such as school supplies and sports-oriented items, for their accomplishments. (Also, SPORT is working with the school to replace non-healthy food awards with healthy food alternatives and non-food awards and to conduct fundraising programs that do not involve non-healthy foods.)

MLK faculty and staff are encouraged to participate as are the students' parents. The involvement of these groups develops an atmosphere of support throughout the school and at home. Stephanie's mom tracked her steps along with her daughter. Stephanie says, "It was good to have somebody else at home doing it."

With parental consents, students are measured on their heights, weights, percentages of body fat and waist and umbilicus circumferences at different time-points (pre-intervention, mid-term and post-intervention) to detect possible physical changes.

Besides the walking program, Exercise Breaks are used to increase physical activity during school. Classes select an Exercise Break card from a box in the classroom. The card describes an exercise activity that lasts 2 to 5 minutes that can be lead by a teacher or a student in the classroom.

SPORT also involves MLK's food service staff regarding school meal modifications for all students. These modifications introduce strategies to reduce fat in school meals and to increase



Stephanie, a fifth grader at MLK Elementary School, has become more physically active since her participation in the SPORT program last year.

fruit and vegetable offerings in compliance with federal guidelines. Stephanie observes that the school is serving more healthy food and a greater variety of fruit and vegetables. The cafeteria is now offering skim milk. The implementation of this plan kicked off with taste test of reduced fat milks by students and school staff last month. By adhering to the modification guidelines developed by SPORT, the food service staff earns credit towards school kitchen equipment purchases.

To close the gap during summer vacation, SPORT sponsored a program at Centennial Park, a park in the neighborhood by MLK and ACH. The park program was held in the mornings for three hours and included games and activities for the children. Little Rock Parks and Recreation provided tennis lessons and the Little Rock School District provided snacks for the participants. Stephanie attended this summer program and played new games. "I liked the obstacle course they made on the playground," says Stephanie. It and other Personal Best Challenges activities made the summer program exciting. (These 10 activities were incorporated into PE classes last fall and are now administered by parents from the School Wellness Committee during recess.) Stephanie also learned more about nutrition and made new friends. Her mother adds that the program also provided a safe and structured place for children. Stephanie loved the water balloon fight on the last day.

Though, as a fifth grader, she cannot participate in SPORT, Stephanie still benefits from the program. The school meal modifications affect her and all MLK students. Also, Stephanie's physical education coach has adopted the Personal Best Challenges activities for his fifth-grade students this school year.

Though she misses the program, Stephanie and her mother still track their steps closely noting the number of steps before bedtime. They make more informed and wiser choices at meal time. When Stephanie takes her lunch to school, it is done with an eye to health and nutrition. She's still an active child. "Sometimes a little too active," jokes her mom. Together they agree that SPORT has made an impact on their lives and in their school and community. Of SPORT, Stephanie would tell other kids, "It really fun, and you get to do a lot of activities." Her mom enthusiastically adds, "I would recommend SPORT for all schools."



Established in 1989, Arkansas Children's Hospital Research Institute provides an on-site research environment for faculty of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences working on the Arkansas Children's Hospital campus. Over 120 pediatric researchers with expertise and experience that span the breadth of medical disciplines comprise ACHRI's roster of investigators who work to fulfill its mission to improve children's health, development, and well-being through high quality research. For more information, visit <http://achri.archildrens.org>.