

7,000 Steps for a Child, a Giant Leap for Prevention

Louisa proudly wears her pedometer on her waist daily. Each step she takes walking to school and returning home adds to the counter. The activities in her PE class increase the total number of steps. At the end of Louisa's day, she records the number of steps faithfully before bedtime. Day after day, the final count ranges between 7,000 and 8,000 steps.

Louisa reports the number of steps to her PE coach at elementary school weekly. The school is participating in a study of the SPORT program. SPORT, which stands for School Partnership for Obesity Research and Prevention, is a school-based physical activity and nutrition program. "SPORT is an obesity prevention program, not a treatment," says Dr. Judith Weber of the Center for Applied Research and Evaluation.

The program strives to make children aware of physical activity and healthy eating to stop the increase in weight gain. "SPORT is appropriate for all children whether they're overweight, normal weight, or underweight," explains Dr. Weber. "Regardless of body size, increased physical activity and healthy food selection are positive choices."



SPORT keeps Louisa a step ahead with good physical activity and nutrition.

The third and fourth graders at Louisa's school are the second group participating in Dr. Weber's SPORT program. In Phase I, significant improvements were made in offerings of competitive foods, which are items such as pizza, candy, and chips often used as rewards and prizes in classrooms, and average numbers of walking steps increased dramatically. Most notably, a significant reduction in average percent body fat was found in participating children. In this second phase of the SPORT study, Dr. Weber and her team will see if they can replicate those results at a second school. Implementing the program at an additional site may also provide new insight into the integration and administration of SPORT.

About Louisa's participation in SPORT, her mother Claudia says, "She gets a kick out of noticing how many steps are on her pedometer." Claudia joins her daughter on her walks to and from school also benefiting from physical activity. The nutrition focus of SPORT has an impact on the lunch Louisa takes to school.

As she does with all of her family's meals, Claudia prefers a proper diet that allows for treats and modest portions and includes grains, fruits, and vegetables in each meal. She packs Louisa's school lunches with the same thought in mind. Louisa lunches usually include a healthy sandwich, a piece of fruit, a cookie or yogurt cup, and a bottle of water.

Dr. Weber wants SPORT activities to keep kids from being caught up in the wave of obesity whether they're overweight or not. She says, "It's good for kids not in traditional sports; SPORT is primarily a walking program. Kids who may be intimidated or not interested in competitive or organized sports can do well in a walking program."

SPORT is not an individual competition. As steps are logged, students can view the classroom totals at the SPORT Web site: www.mysportkids.com. Classrooms compete against each other, and all participants receive sports-oriented items as rewards. The Web site features also support the efforts of the students registered for the Little Rockers Marathon.

With parental consent, each SPORT student is measured on his or her height, weight, percentage of body fat, and waist circumferences at different time-points (pre-intervention, mid-term, and postintervention) to detect possible physical changes, and complete surveys about time spent watching TV and playing video and computer games. Surveys are also collected about the competitive foods offered at the schools. These results will help Dr. Weber's team determine if the SPORT program provides a successful intervention to obesity prevention.

A grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funds SPORT. Arkansas Action for Healthy Kids, ACHRI, Injury Free Coalition for Kids, Midwest Dairy Council, UA Cooperative Extension Service, and UAMS also provide assistance for SPORT and its activities.

Dr. Weber points out that SPORT is intended for third and fourth grade elementary school students, but it can be adapted for all elementary school grades, K through 5. SPORT also has Louisa's endorsement: "Other schools should try it. It's a really good program."



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>.