

News For SWIM PARENTS

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Lifetime Fitness

Growing recognition that many American children are neither developing sufficient fitness, nor learning appropriate lifetime health habits has caused leading physical educators to re-evaluate their long-time methods and shed the traditional coach/drill sergeant image for an educational approach that gives young students the tools for lifetime fitness. Ron Feingold, Ph.D. of Adelphi University in N.Y., and one of the leaders in this movement explains.

"To me what's relevant is what they learn about fitness, and how do they feel about physical activity," Feingold says. "The goal should be to get them to enjoy fitness and physical activities and to understand their benefits."

Accordingly, progressive P.E. teachers are exchanging their former emphasis on teaching competitive sports skills and administering competitive fitness tests for an approach that encourages students to adopt "appropriate lifelong exercise behavior," and a healthy appreciation for physical activity. The proverbial "ounce of prevention" will help children improve their long term health prospects by developing healthy lifestyle habits from an early age.

The new priority is that kids should know how their bodies work after they've had 12 years of physical education. As one teacher said: "It's more important that they understand how to develop strength and cardiovascular fitness, how to train safely, and have a basic understanding of what happens when you move, than that they know how to shoot a basketball."

The changing focus of thinking about youth fitness is also leading to a re-examination of fitness testing methods. Such competitive tests as the Presidential Physical Fitness Test tended to discourage those children who needed help the most. Kids who performed poorly were embarrassed both by taking the fitness test and by their results, while better athletes were rewarded for their performances.

That test has now been adjusted to make it an educational process and to focus on personal improvement rather than performance level with rewards and recognition to those making progress from previous tests. "We want kids to buy into the idea that it's the activity that's important and the performance score is secondary," says Dr. Marilu Meredith, director of youth fitness programs for the Institute of Aerobics Research. "If we can impart an activity habit - and keep it fun - they'll stay active and they will be fit."

What actions can both parents and age group coaches take to import these ideas into age group swimming?

- 1) Consciously communicate to kids the importance of aerobic fitness and "healthy hearts" by raising their level of awareness of swimming's aerobic benefits.
- 2) Be more conscious of the importance of your own role modeling in maintaining good health through personal fitness programs.
- 3) Balance emphasis on achievement and performance for age groupers with emphasis on the simple values of participation for the long term and communicate swimming as simply the first step in a lifelong fitness habit.
- 4) Tie in the value of good nutritional habits, not simply for better performance, but for health's sake.

If we adopt a health-related outlook for age group swimming we'll be giving the kids in our programs a form of lifelong health insurance that can't be purchased at any cost.