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Healthy lifestyles: 'Styling a healthier life'

Promoting a healthier lifestyle is undoubtedly one of the most important messages a school strives to convey to pupils. Practitioners endeavour to ensure that the children with whom they work are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to lead their lives both now and in the future. Indeed, with increasing media attention about the medical issues related to obesity, this is quite literally a growing problem. Without exploring all the elements that contribute to a healthier lifestyle (including: healthier eating, drinking sufficient water, ensuring one receives adequate sleep and rest as well as physical exercise), pupils may lack a broader understanding about how their day-to-day activities and actions affect their lifestyles and consequently their whole lives.

Good habits

As a teacher working in an Infant School, I am passionate that good habits are established early on, in the hope that these solid foundations secure individuals to make healthier choices and ultimately live healthier lifestyles.

Healthy foods are often simplified by children as being the 'right' (rather than 'better') choice. Thus, this conveys the message that foods considered to be unhealthy are 'bad'. This vocabulary provides children with two polar decisions about categorising food and one which I consider to be unrealistic. After all, an important aspect of leading a healthier lifestyle is attributed to balance of nutrition and diet, rest and exercise. It is for this reason that I deliberately use the term 'healthier' rather than 'healthy' (as a definitive term) lifestyle throughout this article.

Healthier lifestyle

The school in which I work, in North West London, does much work to promote the

benefits of adopting healthier lifestyles. Some of the initiatives include promoting: *Walking to School*; the environmental and personal benefits of using sustainable transport; educating parents/carers through workshops and coffee morning sessions about providing nutritional meals for their families; cooking clubs for children; growing vegetables in a patch in the garden; encouraging children to eat fruits and vegetables every day (as part of the 5-a-day scheme), as well as working alongside local football teams to provide after school sport training clubs. I believe that ensuring the healthier lifestyle message is conveyed creatively and in different ways on a regular basis will ensure that pupils don't allow the message to be diluted or considered repetitive. By inviting outside agencies to work with the pupils, we provide opportunities for them to engage with real-life role models and be inspired to work towards longer term goals.

Visitors

I think one of the most important ways of conveying the message of healthier lifestyles is to ask visitors to work alongside the pupils. The pupils engage with visitors differently to the permanent staff in a school, which usually serves to heighten their attention and interest about the information conveyed.

I recently invited a company called *A-life* in to work with the whole School in order to reinvigorate the staff and reinforce messages to the pupils about the importance of leading a healthier lifestyle. The pupils engaged in two days of activities involving a workshop with games and activities exploring the concept of a healthier lifestyle. This work was then followed up the next day with a fitness session after which the children were set a 21-day challenge to engage in a form of physical activity for a

period of twenty minutes each day. If an adult signed off the successful completion of the challenge on a target card, and the child returned their card, they received a certificate.

Family support

Children's success and involvement with school-led schemes requires a level of family support and it is crucial to ensure that children's parents/carers not only know about the school's work around these issues, but that they are also actively engaged and have opportunities to participate themselves.

The children's families were made aware of the programme, launched with pupils in the school, by means of a letter and coffee-morning workshop. The nature and reasons for adopting the Healthier Lifestyles program were shared with families and the 21-day challenge was explained. The message emphasised that boosting levels of general daily activity can improve health and energy levels significantly and has also been proved to boost pupil performance throughout the school day.

It seems that more informal coffee morning sessions offered a forum through which tips and ideas for making healthier and tasty easy to prepare snacks could be shared. Guest speakers, such as nutritionists, could be invited to lead the group thus offering families an opportunity to access expert advice.

Conclusion

As the old saying tells us '*an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of the cure*'. As I work

in the Early Years, I believe that building a thorough and consistent framework, through which different strategies and schemes may be interwoven, helps to build a strong context for the pupils, as well as, ensuring the message about healthier lifestyles is one that is consistently and tirelessly repeated. The *Walking to School* scheme, healthier lifestyles programmes, inviting guests to promote healthier lifestyles and working with the children to reinforce this message are important features of developing a truly 'Healthy School' and community, as we support the next generation to lead healthier lifestyles in their futures.

Key Points

- Encourage the whole school to participate in schemes and special events
- Look out for advertisements for National events. Often they will provide free incentives for the children that participate
- Encourage members of the local community to come and work with the pupils. The children are often more responsive to visitors
- Encourage the children's families to become involved with school programmes and schemes
- Ensure that programmes and schemes are followed up so that the key messages about leading healthier lifestyles are reiterated and reinforced

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