I have lived in Southern California for most of my adult life and have grown to think that most of the United States is like this place in terms of the way people think and act. I am always (naively, I guess) amazed when I travel and see that, in many ways, Southern California is quite unique. Fortunately or unfortunately Southern California, or at least Los Angeles, is very focused on personal appearance. I always notice when I travel that in other parts of the country every other television advertisement is NOT for a health club, beauty product, weight loss aid or program, or cosmetic surgery. After a time in Los Angeles I find many people think that size 6 is the average size for a woman and everyone works out. However, I have recently started to notice that this focus (for better or worse) is all on adults. Luckily, for many children, they are not included in this push for beauty and perfect bodies. Unfortunately, some children are influenced by these ads and, perhaps, by their parents’ activities and behaviors as they work to achieve some unattainable physique. Many of these children may go on to imitate their parents’ push for perfection, and some may even develop eating disorders or an obsession with their bodies. These children definitely need our help to develop more healthy attitudes about their bodies and how to achieve good health. However, other children (the majority) need our help to become healthier by becoming more active and eating healthier without being pushed to the extreme. It is this group I would like to focus on.

Even in body-conscious Southern California I find that many children are not adequately physically active. Indeed today I was at the health club in the late afternoon. This club, as do most here, has an after-school child care program so parents can work out while their children are supervised. I’m usually there in the early morning when children are not there so today I decided to see what the children were up to. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised but what I found was all the children sitting down watching videos. No one was throwing a ball, jumping rope, or doing exercises; they were passively sitting and watching the television screen while their parents were madly working out...something was definitely wrong with this picture. Then I thought of my recent experience helping a neighbor by caring for her two children for a few days while she recuperated from surgery. My main job was to be the “transporter,” taking them to school and then to their various after-school activities. The children’s school is two blocks from their home, yet I found when I asked them when we should leave to walk to school, they looked at me like I had arrived from Mars. Of course we were to drive to school! Since they weren’t my children off we drove, and I found that everyone else did too. I certainly understand safety issues in having children walk to school by themselves. However, I found it took me longer to load them into the car, find a place to park, etc. than if we had walked...and we all missed that opportunity for physical activity. The after-school activities weren’t much better. One of these children played on a soccer team and one played softball. I took one to practice then the next and noticed that at neither practice was there much activity. Even at the soccer game there was some warm-up but they spent the majority of their time sitting or waiting for a turn to kick the ball; they then were driven home, ready to sit and watch some television before dinner, followed by doing their homework. I know this experience shouldn’t have been such a shock for me but it was. I am always advising families to increase their exercise activity, but I don’t think I understood how important this is and how inactivity must be a major contributor to the epidemics of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes that we are now dealing with in our clinical practices.

This lack of physical activity has been well documented. Indeed, more than one-third of all high school students do not get the amount of vigorous physical activity recommended by Healthy People 2010 (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). The International Consensus Conference on Physical Activity Guidelines for Adolescents recommend that adolescents...
should be physically active and participate in vigorous physical activity 3 or more times a week for at least 20 minutes. (Promoting Better Health, 2000). Female adolescents have been found to be much less active than males (Child Trends, 2002). Further, the percentage of children and adolescents who are overweight has tripled in the past 30 years. These facts are not new or surprising to those of us caring for children and their families, but we must continue our efforts to reduce this national epidemic. I think helping families become more active is an important part of this effort.

Since my observations with the children described above I have tried to focus more on assessing individual children and their family’s activity level and providing more specific guidelines and suggestions for increasing activity. We need to help children to enjoy being more active and not seeing it as “doing exercise” and then returning to a “fun” activity. Many daily chores and jobs around the home can be turned into more physically strenuous activities. For example, I recently had the opportunity to do some flower planting with my granddaughters. When I first asked them who would like to help, they both moaned, one heading for the computer and the other for the television. I reminded them how much they loved the beautiful flowers and they begrudgingly agreed to help. I decided to turn this into a game of physical exercise, so we turned the planting into a game. We made up rules that no plant could be potted without the “planter” doing 10 toe touches first, then we escalated to adding jumping jacks, short runs back and forth to the planting soil, etc. Indeed we turned a fairly sedentary activity into a very vigorous one. I am sure the neighbors thought we had all flipped out, but we were having fun and being physically active at the same time. This is what we need to help parents do, turn those usual activities into more physically active ones.

Many children will moan when asked to go for a walk, but by setting a goal such as counting the number of trees or seeing how many animals they can find can turn such an activity into a fun time. I have found that many parents today were not particularly physically active themselves as children, and they may not have the experiences or knowledge to help their children be more active. Society has certainly changed; children are involved in many more organized activities and often have very little “free time.” In many communities it is not safe for children to play, ride bikes or skate by themselves. This may be the new reality but we can’t let such circumstances negatively affect children’s current and future health status. Helping families become more physically active is fun. I’m sure that for every suggestion I have made, you can add hundreds of ways to increase children’s activity. Let’s make this a summer to help the children and families we care for to become more active. Rather than give general advice we need to help families with very specific suggestions and then follow up to see what’s worked and what hasn’t. That feedback can then be used to help other families. Summer should be fun and activity should be too. We have the chance to help improve children’s health by making the most of an active summer. Try it.

—Bobbie Crew Nelms, PhD, RN, CPNP

REFERENCES

