



Latreal Mitchell,
NASM Youth Exercise
Specialist (YES), shares
the gift of fitness.

SAY YES TO YOUTH

With childhood obesity on the rise and in-school physical education programs under siege, you can make a difference, for children and your business.

BY MICHAEL WOELFLEIN ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUSTIN FENSTERMACHER

MORE THAN ONE-THIRD OF U.S. CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS ARE OVERWEIGHT or obese. The obesity rate for 6- to 19-year-olds more than doubled from 1980 to 2010, to about 18%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Meanwhile, schools are cutting physical education in the face of budget problems and lax regulations. The Department of Health and Human Services recommends at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day for youths—including aerobic, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening exercises—but only six states require 150 minutes per week in elementary schools, and even fewer push for enough exercise for older kids. It's an ugly set of numbers, because exercise helps kids live happier lives, avoid disease, and even perform better academically. But it also means there's an opportunity for fitness and sports medicine professionals to step in and help.

A HERO FOR THE MASSES

Latreal Mitchell, NASM-CPT, CES, YES (Youth Exercise Specialist), is doing her part. Every weekday in July, Mitchell led two-hour workouts and nutrition/healthy living sessions for 80 kids at the Link Community School in Newark, N.J.

“They get it,” she says. “They say, ‘Wow, what am I doing to myself—creating diabetes and bad habits?’ You see that aha moment, and it’s awesome. They tell their parents, ‘Don’t do that’—and why. It’s empowerment from the bottom up.”

Mitchell is thinking bigger too. She created a cartoon team of kid superheroes, The Fitness Bunch™, who empower children to exercise, eat healthier, and make smart choices. It’s now a nonprofit foundation (fitnessbunch.org) and Mitchell hopes to publish her first book in 2014, starring Kidd Fantastic™.

“We’re going to reach the masses, the kids who really need us, wherever they are,” Mitchell says. “We want to create a place for kids to go for the support they need.”

The personal trainer/lifestyle coach to former NFL (and current morning TV) superstar Michael Strahan first took up the cause in 2000, long before youth obesity and fitness became a hot topic. Mitchell developed and ran a summer Fit Academy for Kids in the Los Angeles area for four years, helping hundreds of kids, with support from the local chapter of the American Heart Association. She’s also spoken at schools.

It all started when Mitchell was working at a Los Angeles-area gym and an 11-year-old girl asked her for help to make the school’s track team. The girl’s mother couldn’t pay for training but didn’t want a handout, and the daughter didn’t make the team.

Mitchell revels in that aha moment when kids like these at the Link Community School in Newark, N.J., “get it” and understand the power (and fun) of healthy living for themselves and their families.



WHAT THE SCIENCE SAYS

Simple Steps, Big Benefits

Exercise helps kids and teens in sports, life, and even the classroom.

STRONG FOR LIFE Regular physical activity makes youths stronger, improves their endurance, and helps them build and maintain healthy bones and muscles. “I love to see the awkward kids become less awkward, learn how to move,” says Latreal Mitchell, NASM-CPT, CES, YES. “Learning about this now is going to change their lives.”

FREEDOM FROM DISEASE AND DEPRESSION Regular exercise decreases the risk of a long list of diseases and conditions, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, depression, anxiety, and certain cancers. “When kids exercise, good things happen,” says Mary C. Friesz, PhD, RD, CDE, LDN. “It’s as simple as that.”

A THOUGHTFUL GENERATION Studies show that regular exercise may improve cognitive skills, study habits, personal conduct, grades, and test scores. John J. Ratey, MD, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, has made physical education his life’s work. He points to Naperville, Ill., where a fitness-based, in-school program has helped reduce overweight kids to 3% of the population, and helped the school place No. 1 on a worldwide standardized test for science and No. 6 in math. “Exercise turns on the brain,” Dr. Ratey says. “It makes the learner ready to learn. It makes our brain cells ready to do what they’re supposed to do, and it promotes the growth of new brain cells. It’s amazing. With a little bit of exercise, we can affect so many people. We can change our culture. Really.”





Keys to a meaningful youth fitness program: fun, integration, progression, and parental involvement.



TRY THIS

Link Up with Kids Who Need You

Looking to partner with schools or community programs?

HAVE A PLAN. “Define what makes you special, and what you can do to help,” says Mitchell. Then, “Make the program,” says Chris Falcon, NASM-CPT, CES, PES, YES. “Start with the basics, then add fun, integration, and progression. Once it’s on paper, you’ll be motivated to share it.”

REACH OUT TO YOUR CIRCLE FIRST. Your clients have kids. Your friends have kids. “Don’t look for new connections right away,” Falcon says. “Tell everyone you know, and empower them to help you get your idea out there.” Mitchell’s star client, Michael Strahan, put her in touch with Newark Mayor Cory Booker, which led her to the Link program.

START WITH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS. “Public schools are tough, because you need the whole district to approve, not just a principal,” Mitchell says. Look to local YMCAs, recreation departments, churches, and private schools.

GET SPONSORS. Mitchell has subsidized her programs in the past but eventually found corporate and government support. “Reach out to see who else sees this as a problem,” says Friesz. “Pediatricians might be willing to support your effort with dollars. Parks and recreation directors might go to bat for you.”

INCLUDE PARENTS. In Mitchell’s program, kids keep a food and activity journal. She also requires parents to visit periodically. “It’s not going to matter if you’re teaching the kids and getting them in shape if the parents are still buying Cheetos,” she says.

“I saw a kid miss out on something she really wanted at that age,” Mitchell says. “I knew then that kids were going to need help.”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Mary C. Friesz, PhD, RD, CDE, LDN, has seen up close that not enough kids or families are getting what they need. With a background in nutrition and wellness, she’s been working with children for 25 years. And lately she’s seen children as young as 15 diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

“Fifteen years ago, the youngest type 2 patient I saw was 45,” says the author of *Food, Fun n’ Fitness: Designing Healthy Lifestyles for Our Children* and frequent teacher of NASM-approved continuing education courses. “I’ve seen high blood pressure in little kids. So they already have middle-aged diseases, and the scariest thing is, we don’t know what these diseases do to the growth and development of these children. We won’t know for another 10 or 15 years.”

The best solution, she and other experts say, is physical education and nutrition programs in schools, combined with education for parents. But in more and more places, that’s not happening.

“There are a lot of kids who don’t get 60 minutes a week,” says Dr. Friesz. “They walk from the car to the house and from the couch to the bathroom, and they work out their thumbs while gaming or texting. I don’t understand why the



people who are making the rules in our schools don't see the benefit of exercise for our kids."

Dr. Friesz, who wrote her book in 2000, started the fight in the late 1980s, when she developed and ran a 10-week Food, Fun & Fitness program in Harlem, New York. This year, she's joining the Solmaz Institute for Obesity at Lenoir-Rhyne University, where she'll lead a similar program for people of all income levels.

"The time has come for fitness professionals to help," she says. "If we all get together and do whatever we can, we can make a huge difference."

EMPOWERING KIDS

Chris Falcon, NASM-CPT, CES, PES, YES, owns and runs the Reactive Performance Enhancement Center in an upscale Chicago suburb, where he sees a split between kids with overuse injuries from too much (or too focused) sports programming and those who "don't do anything." They're often 40 or 50 pounds overweight, he says, totally sedentary, and struggling.

"They feel defeated," Falcon says. "That's wrong. You can't be defeated when we haven't even had a chance to get you in the game yet—and I mean life, not sports. We need to empower these kids and get them to understand what they can do."

Falcon started the Highland Park (Ill.) Kid Fit program in 1998. Since then, he's trained everyone from kids who barely know how to move to

John Moore, the New York Rangers defenseman who introduced himself to Falcon at age 12 and said he would play in the NHL someday.

Falcon runs one-week Movement Exposure Camps for 10- to 18-year-olds during the summer. The 90-minute sessions feature mental prep; warm-ups; movement prep; speed and agility; body-weight resistance training; core work that emphasizes balance, stability, strength, and power; cool-down dynamic stretching; and a talk about the benefits of healthy eating and exercise.

"We want them to raise their awareness, to understand their body and what it's capable of, and we want them to have fun," Falcon says. "Exercise can't be something they think is negative."

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Falcon and Mitchell are at the forefront of a market that could explode in the coming years.

"The beauty of youth fitness is that it hasn't reached its peak," Mitchell says. "Now is the time to really get involved, to get your Youth Exercise Specialist credential. People are starting to pay attention to what's happening with their kids. It's a catch-the-wave moment."

Falcon believes that working with kids will become a bigger part of his business, and soon. "There's a ton of demand, and I'm in a competitive environment, with 11 gyms around me," he says. "You have to set yourself apart with a great program, but the kids are coming, more and more."

"They need it," he adds. "So do we, as a country."

MEET OUR EXPERTS



LATREAL MITCHELL, NASM-CPT, CES, YES. Mitchell is the founder and CEO of the nonprofit Fitness Bunch Foundation. Her Get Fit kids' workout/hip-hop video has generated more than 14,000 YouTube views.



CHRIS FALCON, NASM-CPT, CES, PES, YES. Falcon was the little kid running around the gym, trying to pick up 10-pound dumbbells. He believes strongly in body intelligence and helping people communicate with and listen to their bodies.



JOHN RATEY, MD. Dr. Ratey is one of the foremost experts on youth and physical education as it relates to brain function. He is spreading the word through his nonprofit, Sparking Life (sparkinglife.org).



MARY C. FRIESZ, PHD, RD, CDE, LDN. Dr. Friesz is an expert on diabetes, weight, eating disorders, and nutrition. She lost more than 50 pounds 30 years ago—and maintained it. Her 19-year-old hockey player son inspired her focus on youth.



BOOST YOUR SKILLS

Key to Youth Success

The Youth Exercise Specialist (YES) credential prepares you to help young clients lose weight, improve their skills in sports, and learn things about their bodies that will serve them for the rest of their lives. It can help you enter and succeed in a niche market that's growing every day. And it can position you to help in the larger battle against obesity. For more information, visit nasm.org/yes, or call 877-670-2489.