

The Center For

**Kids FIRST**

**in Sports, Health, & Education**

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## **Inactivity & Obesity:**

A Ticking Time Bomb

By

Regis Tremblay

*The Mission of The Center For Kids FIRST is to examine the culture surrounding youth sports and play, determine it's effects, identify alternative approaches, and outline strategies that place the needs and wants of Kids First.*

*This article was originally part of the background and resources we provided Congresswoman Mary Bono for her proposed legislation. The legislation is known as: The Bono-Granger-Lowey Improved Nutrition and Physical Activity Act (IMPACT). You can visit Congresswoman Bono's website at: [www.house.gov/bono/](http://www.house.gov/bono/)*

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“Obesity in America is worse than ever” scream the headlines. (USA Today, Wednesday, October 9, 2002) Current research reveals that 64.5% of American adults are overweight or obese. That's a startling 120 million people! Obese is defined as 30 or more pounds overweight. Overweight is 10-30 pounds overweight.

- 31% - 59 million – adults who are older than 20 are obese.
- 33% of adult women are obese
- 28% of adult men are obese
- 50% of black women are obese
- 40% of Mexican-American women are obese
- 5% of people overall are extremely obese.
- 15% of children ages 6-19 – 9 million – are overweight.

Health professionals are calling it an epidemic and calling for immediate action. There are two main reasons for this troubling trend: 1) an abundance of food – much of it fast food, 2) and a marked decrease in regular physical activity.

Health officials and insurance company analysts predict that the epidemic will overburden an already inundated health care system with sharp increases in the incidence of diabetes, heart disease, liver disease, arthritis, cancer, strokes and other health problems. For children, one of the most severe consequences is psychosocial. Not only do children battle with low self-esteem and

a lack of self-confidence, but also they are often ostracized and discriminated against. Obesity is a major public health problem.

The answer lies in prevention: healthy eating habits, regular physical activity, and reduced sedentary activities such as watching TV and playing video games. Healthy behaviors and attitudes must be developed in early childhood.

The Center For Kids FIRST believes that three major cultural issues have also helped to create this epidemic: 1) the near extinction of mandatory physical education for all K-12 children; 2) a “select-the-best, win-at-all-costs” mentality in organized youth sports; and 3) diets high in calories, fats, sugar, salt, and carbohydrates.

### **Inadequate Physical Education**

In most states, physical education has been left up to the discretion of states and local districts. Shrinking budgets have led to the near elimination of physical education as a required, daily component of the educational process. Once popular “intramural” sports have also gone the way of the buggy whip.

The Facts:

- Daily PE for K-12 is mandatory only in Illinois.
- Nationally, only 29% of high school students had daily PE in 1999, down from 42% in 1991.
- Only 61% of K-12 students had gym class once per week.

### **Youth Sports: Selecting the Best and Neglecting the Rest**

Simultaneously over the past 20 years, our system of youth sports organized by adults has done its part to eliminate all but the elite. Of the 40 million children – ages 7-18 – participating in youth sports, 70% - 28 million - will either quit or be dropped by the system by the time they are 15, the year they enter high school.

The Facts:

- 70% of all kids playing youth sports organized by adults quit or are dropped by the age of 15.
- On average, interscholastic sports only serve 20% of the student population.
- It is estimated that nationally, high school interscholastic sports cost about 10% of the total district budget when transportation, insurance, fees, salaries, and maintenance are included. That could be anywhere from \$500,000 to \$5 million dollars depending on the size of the district.
- Participation in interscholastic sports is declining while participation in club/select/travel sports is increasing.
- Across the country, districts from Maine to California are cutting back and even eliminating athletic budgets because of severe budget cuts.

From age 7 through age 15, kids drop out because it stops being fun. Being ignored during practices, sitting on the bench for all but the required one time at bat, and one inning in the field, isn't much fun. As they get older, it is also very embarrassing. Kids join teams to play and have fun. Not to sit and watch others. The reason this happens is an overriding need to “win” that outweighs the need for all kids to develop their skills, learn the game, and have fun.

When it stops being fun, they quit. There are other reasons why kids quit that are related to pressure from over-involved parents and out-of-control, overbearing coaches. But regardless of the reasons why they quit, the fact is that 28 million kids quit playing and become physically inactive for the rest of their lives by the time they reach high school. It is not surprising that less than 20% of the 4 million youth coaches (high schools included) have received little or no training. The only qualification required is the willingness to volunteer. Former playing experience is rarely useful for what is required of a person placed in the position of teaching children how to play sports.

### **Condemned by the Food Chain**

Almost 90% of Americans will live shorted lives because of the food we eat. That's right! Furthermore there isn't much we can do about it when most of the food we eat is calorie dense and high in fats, sugar, salt, and additives. We are even being encouraged to eat less fish, which is supposed to be very good for us, because of high levels of contamination from mercury.

#### The Facts About Obesity:

- 64% of Americans are overweight or obese – 120 million people
- 31% - 59 million adults are obese
- 33% of adult women are obese
- 28% of adult men are obese
- 50% of African-American women are obese
- 40% of Mexican-American women are obese
- 5.3 million children and adolescents age 6-17 are overweight or obese

#### The Facts About Diet

- The CDC reports that Americans are eating twice as much per serving in 2004 than in 1974. That includes fast-food and regular restaurants, as well as meals prepared at home.
- Our diets are not only calorie dense, but high in saturated fats, sugar, and carbohydrates.
- 27 million children take part in the National School Lunch Program. Half of the school lunches served do not meet federal standards!
- \$6 Billion federal dollars goes to schools each year to offer low cost meals.
- \$800 million worth of cheese, whole milk, beef and pork are sent to schools. These are the heavy, high-saturated fat foods that contribute to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.
- There are 10 teaspoons of sugar in a 12 oz soft drink served in school cafeterias and from vending machines in the school.
- A typical lunch at school consists of hamburgers and fries, pizza, and burritos.
- The average American consumes more than 32 teaspoons of added sugar every day.

#### The Facts About Exercise

- 80% of our children do not participate in significant amounts of daily physical activity.
- 70% of adults report no regular exercise.
- Four in ten adults are not physically active at all.
- Half of American youth aged 12-21 are not vigorously active.
- 14% of our children report no physical activity at all.
- Participation in all types of physical activity declines sharply as age or grade in school increases.

## The Facts About Health

- Diet and physical activity accounted for 400,000 deaths in 2002 – 16.6 percent
- Tobacco accounted for 435,000 deaths in 2002 – 18.1 percent
- Treatment costs for obesity-related diseases exceeds \$100 Billion per year.
- Obesity and weight related diseases cost YOU, the taxpayer, \$36 Billion per year.
- 40 million Americans are unable to afford health care.
- The federal government spends \$1,500 per person treating disease and about \$1 on prevention.
- Disease treatment has added 5 years to our lifespan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while Public Health and Prevention programs have added 25 years to our lifespan.
- This generation of children will be the first NOT to outlive their parents.

## The Ticking Timebomb

As a nation, we have become passive, sedentary, and very unhealthy. The facts cannot be disputed. The handwriting is clearly on the wall for all to see. Because of this situation, our children will not live longer than us, and 40 million Americans are without health care. As the costs of health care continue to rise because of weight-related diseases, experts predict that the insurance and health care industries will collapse under the burden and that the federal government will be bankrupt.

For us individuals, this means that we run the risk of shortened life spans, and very low quality of life. One in eight children have three or more risk factors for diabetes and heart disease. Type II diabetes, formerly called Adult Onset Diabetes, is now showing up in children. The cause: obesity and the lack of exercise.

At the same time, our schools are being forced to focus on “the core” subjects, and standardized testing. This is due in part to severe budget shortfalls as well as philosophical and political reasons. What this really means is that “extracurricular” things such as PE, Art, Music, Drama, Journalism, and now interscholastic sports are dropped.

A completely different argument can be made against the elimination of these important aspects of a well-rounded individual, but this fact is perfectly clear: we are forcing 40 million children into inactivity and unhealthy lifestyles. No species, no population, no nation can survive the consequences of this enormous crisis.

## Clear and Simple – Common Sense

The antidote to all of the above is clear, simple, and resides in an area we call Common Sense. Everyone one of us knows that Exercise and Healthy Food choices make for a healthy life and increased longevity. It is that simple! Everybody knows it. Unfortunately, our very culture has condemned the majority of us to passive lifestyles and overeating.

Everyone also knows that changing personal habits (quitting smoking, losing weight) is the hard part. The Center for Kids FIRST in Sports, Health, & Education believes it begins by changing the systems that control behavior.

## Re-designing the System and Re-tooling The Coaches

**The Center For Kids FIRST** believes that creative and innovative PE and after-school programs are required to provide fun and healthy physical activity for all children, not just the elite athletes. Second, we believe that our system of organized youth sports needs to be changed in ways that help all kids have fun, develop their skills and continue playing sports for life.

Our All-American After School Program provides a creative, fun, and holistic approach to learning. It, in fact, incorporates academic, social, cultural, and physical activities in a healthy, mildly competitive environment.

In order to change the culture of youth sports, **The Center For Kids FIRST** has developed a comprehensive program to bring about that change. Based upon the principles of cultural change, we use large group learning experiences to involve coaches, parents, and students in changing the way they “do business.”

- We have developed a 48-hour Coaching Development Series that teaches coaches how to teach and how to communicate with kids and their parents.
- Our Parenting the Young Athlete seminars are directed at helping parents understand the culture of youth sports by examining their beliefs, expectations, hopes, and dreams for their children.
- The student/athlete “Whole Person” workshops help students understand the culture of youth sports, their realistic expectations and their rights.
- Our Blueprint for Change Program helps schools and leagues re-design to include all children and to restore balance and fun to youth sports.

Funding for these types of programs have not yet become a priority. It is our belief that adding more fields, supplying more equipment, and providing more education about fitness, nutrition, and physical activity will not solve the problems that are inherent in the culture of youth sports today.

Support and incentives from the highest levels of government must also focus on re-aligning the goals and objectives of athletics and physical activity with the educational and social mission of our public schools. This would include interscholastic sports; daily physical education for all K-12 children not involved in team sports; and intramural sports to accommodate the millions of children who wish to continue playing sports but are cut from teams.

**The Center for Kids FIRST** also provides information and resources that enable parents to become more involved in school district politics and activities for the sole purpose of influencing those decision-makers to reinstate daily physical education and to implement healthy school lunch programs.

These efforts are a critical piece of the solution to keeping kids healthy. Our programs and approach are the result of years of experience in teaching, coaching, and promoting cultural change. By keeping all kids physically active and playing sports for life we can make great strides towards solving the public health problem of increasing rates of obesity and related serious, chronic diseases.

You can do your part by volunteering. **The Center for Kids FIRST in Sports, Health, and Education** will train you to become a program leader in your community. For more information about our Affiliate Program, please contact us on line at: [Regis@CenterForKidsFIRST.org](mailto:Regis@CenterForKidsFIRST.org).

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*Regis Tremblay is an organization development consultant and learning leader living in Phoenix, Arizona. He is the author of numerous articles and workshops on Leadership, Change, Organizational Learning, and Youth Sports.*

*He began his career as a high school teacher and coach in 1975. During those years, Regis began to discover some of the basic truths about how people learn and work together, especially the use of large group processes.*

*In 1993, he also began coaching his own children and has coached soccer, Little League baseball, softball, and ice hockey. He has served on several youth boards, and served in numerous capacities with the Phoenix Coyotes Youth Hockey program.*

*As a charter member of the Coyotes Youth Hockey Association, Regis was responsible for developing the coaching development program and recruiting and certifying over 100 coaches. He has been involved in youth sports for over 30 years as a coach, league administrator, and board member, and continues to play adult hockey in an "over-40" league.*

*In 1993, Regis founded the Tremblay Group and began working with a variety of organizations where he continued his study and research about organizational and personal transformation and how people learn and work together in complex adaptive systems.*

*In 2002, Regis founded The Center For Kids FIRST in Sports, Health, & Education as a resource for young athletes, parents, league administrators, coaches, and other adults who care about the influence of organized youth sports on child development, families, and schools.*

*The Center offers many valuable resources and services that include: workshops for athletes, parents, and coaches; sport awareness programs; video programs; a Tool Kit For Change; an Organization Scorecard, and helpful advice for parents and families to understand their involvement in organized youth sports.*

*You can contact Regis Tremblay at: [Regis@CenterForKidsFIRST.org](mailto:Regis@CenterForKidsFIRST.org)*

*Visit us on the Web at:  
[www.CenterForKidsFIRST.org](http://www.CenterForKidsFIRST.org)*