



## Keeping America Fit and Healthy

By  
Regis Tremblay

*The Mission of The Center For Kids FIRST in Sports is to examine the culture surrounding youth sports, 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 In Sports believes that two major cultural issues have also helped to create this epidemic: 1) the near extinction of mandatory physical education for all children K-12, and 2) a “select-the-best, win-at-all-costs” mentality in organized youth sports.

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.

**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.**

From age 7 through age 15, kids drop out because it stopped 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.

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

**The Center For Kids FIRST In Sports** 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 Life-Fitness Games provides a creative, fun, and holistic approach to Physical Education. It, in fact, incorporates academic, social, cultural, and physical activities in a healthy, mildly competitive environment. (See attached Life-Fitness Games)

In order to change the culture of youth sports, **The Center For Kids FIRST In Sports** 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.

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.

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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 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.*

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[www.kidsfirstinsports.org](http://www.kidsfirstinsports.org)*