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Eschewing the fat

By Lisa M. Sodders
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GRANADA HILLS -- The growing problem of kids getting fat because of too much time spent in front of television sets and computer screens came under attack Wednesday by a new program that tries to make exercise fun.

The goal of the program is to get kids to vigorously exercise one hour a week at school, not enough to burn away calories but enough to boost their athletic prowess and give them confidence to choose the soccer field over the sofa.

Organizers say the children can then incorporate these physical skills they've learned into school recess times during the week and in after-school activities.

"The children who are not good (at sports)... never dominate play. They become couch potatoes or stand on the sidelines and never get access to the ball," said Terry Sweeting, an assistant professor in kinesiology at California State University, Northridge.

"The more skills you have, you truly have more choices."

Under the partnership launched Wednesday at Knollwood Elementary School in Granada Hills, CSUN provides the know-how and the North Valley Family YMCA at Porter Ranch the instructors to get students into shape. Eight other Los Angeles Unified schools are introducing the program.

Studies show that childhood obesity is a growing problem nationally. LAUSD students are in worse physical shape than their peers statewide. Only 17 percent

of fifth-graders in the district met all six minimum-fitness standards in a 2002 fitness test.

As budgets have tightened, schools have slashed virtually all physical education programs from daily class schedules in recent years. Kids have had to cram sporting activities into recess, which doesn't leave much time, so they are genuinely excited about a program that lets them get more physical.

Eight-year-old Helena Turbin of Panorama City said she particularly enjoys playing soccer. "When I make a lot of goals and play with my friends, it makes me feel happy," she said. "I tell my Dad, and he's happy."

Andres Villa, 8, of Granada Hills said physical education is important even if you don't want to grow up to be a soccer star.

"If someone asks you, 'Do you want to play with us?' then you have to learn how to play football and basketball and soccer," Andres said. "Then you'll have more friends."

Childhood obesity carries significant health risks. According to a study released this week in the Journal of the American Medical Association, one in three Americans born in the year 2000 will develop diabetes at some point in life, mainly because of the increasing rates of obesity.

Poor nutrition, too much time spent on computer games and other sedentary activities and a lack of safe places for children to play have been blamed for the alarming rate of obesity in American children.

In addition to five YMCA staff members, there are 10 CSUN graduate students who are gaining hands-on experience working with kids. One of those students, Janette Risk, is also a youth fitness director at the YMCA.

"The (kids) hate to stretch," Risk said. "So I asked them, 'Do you think professional athletes stretch?' I told them (athletes are) less prone to injuries because they have flexibility, and they stretch and drink water so they're hydrated. Those are the things that get their attention -- talk about Michael Jordan."

"If you make it fun, the kids think it's fun," Risk said.

In addition to Knollwood, the following schools are involved in the program: Andasol Avenue School, Castlebay Lane School, Darby Avenue School, Dearborn Street School, all in Northridge; Germain Street School in Chatsworth; Hart Street School in Canoga Park; Mayall Street School in North Hills and Van Gogh Street School in Granada Hills.

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