Getting bums out of seats

Physicians and other health professionals have been identified as potentially powerful agents of change in promoting physical activity, but most don’t practice in their practices. One US study showed that less than a third of the adult sample reported receiving advice about physical activity from their physicians and, of those who did, less than half got help making a plan or follow-up support.

Sadly, most physicians lack the training, the knowledge, and often the time to do the job well. Perhaps that is why, in spite of recommendations, physicians don’t spend less time offering their patients screening tests and physical examinations and more time promoting physical activity. The medical literature shows that advice to exercise given by physicians is not highly effective in changing behaviour.

If physicians can’t turn back this tide of inactivity, who can? The answer lies within us—in our communities and particularly in our schools. Leading researchers think that the most effective way to get and keep our children moving is through school- or community-based interventions.

An example of just such a powerful intervention lies close to my home. In my neighbourhood a dedicated volunteer parent named Brent Lockridge approached physical education teacher John Ellis to start a cross-country running program for kids from grades 1 to 8. Within 2 years more than 300 kids—almost half the school—were running 3 to 5 mornings a week and racing in local and regional meets. I wondered how they did it, so I asked Brent. He emphasized 4 things: make the activity simple and accessible to all; make it fair—kids who show up to train get to race no matter their ability; manage parents’ expectations—he and John spent more time coaching parents to focus on participation instead of winning than they did coaching the kids to run; and make it congruent with the values of the community. It has been more than a decade now and every autumn during the first weeks of school dozens of children of all ages, shapes, sizes, and colours begin to stream past my house down into a nearby park for their morning runs.

Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page 912.