

Wellness for Children

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This session will look at Wellness for Children and Youth across the educational spectrum:

- I. Definition of Wellness for Youth – Comparison and Contrast to definition for adults.

Definition of Wellness for K-12
- II. Examination of Physical, Mental, Emotional, Social, Spiritual wellness
Developmental Aspects
- III. Pairing of appropriate activities in various areas of wellness along
developmental structure
- IV. Ideas for implementing wellness activities within various group structures:
Classroom/scouts/faith-based/community-based

Goals of Session: Participants will

- be able to define wellness as it pertains to children and youth and be able to differentiate between the two;
- examine the developmental level of each grade level and the implications for wellness programming and focus within those developmental levels
- examine various wellness-directed activities for K-12 students in the areas of physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual wellness.

The most exciting thing in the world is to watch kids get “turned on” to Wellness...to their bodies, their health, and their appreciation of themselves.

The field of wellness for children has changed drastically since I wrote the above sentence some thirty-five years ago when I began the journey of working in the field of wellness for youth. “Wellness” was in its infancy. Most of our programming for youth in those days came from the work of the YMCA, and ancillary educational material from the

American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the American Lung Association.

We were creative in those days. My student nurses created innovative, fresh, participatory classes for the schools surrounding our community hospital that involved K-8 students in learning through doing; growing through participation in related wellness-directed activities in their homes, their communities and their schools.

We used the best research and statistics we had, but we certainly weren't "science-based" in the ways we are today. Most of our evidence of success was anecdotal ---and amazing.

I had the honor of collaborating with amazing people from around the country who added wonderful and creative pieces to the process. Our initial goal was to establish programs for our students that focused on "Do", rather than "Don't" and that focused on a lot of "doing" and not a lot of pencil and paper operations.

Fast forward 35 years.

One of the benefits I have had is the opportunity to check back with many of those young people that I taught many years ago-- many of them now in their mid to late 40's -- to determine the impact of those early wellness classes.

What they remember --- and they remember a lot -- isn't about the curriculum or the statistics or the risk factors. What they remember is what they became as a result of what they experienced in our time together over the period of their Kindergarten through Middle School years.

The values that we came up with those many years ago still stand strong, because they still work with the students that I continue to work with. (some them the third generation children from those early students!)

Remember -- these goals were written a long time before we had the information that we have today, but their relevance is still here and their continuing fulfillment is what still makes it all worthwhile -- and fun -- watching kids really get turned on to who they are and who they are becoming.

GOALS OF WELLNESS EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN

- The child accepts responsibility for his own health within the range of his age and capability
- He examines alternatives to various lifestyle practices;

- He develops and clarified his values;
- He develops skills in dealing objectively with peer pressure and establishes peer group support for positive lifestyle;
- He learns skills in observing, describing and handling health emergencies;
- He sees himself as a worthwhile individual able to make decisions about his health and wellbeing within the framework of his age and experience;
- He develops an understanding and reduces apprehension concerning health personnel, facilities and procedures.
- He understands the importance of friendship and the impact of friends in his life.

A child who feels good about himself, who has a positive self-regard for his individual qualities, is in less jeopardy of being influenced by outside pressures as he makes important life decisions. A health self-concept together with a solid foundation in decision-making skills are two of the most important qualities of a self-responsible person and should be the main goals in developing wellness programs for children

Requirements for a Successful Wellness Endeavor

Relevant curriculum

- based on the developmental sequence of the child
- incorporating activities and materials that are appropriate and enjoyable for the current emotional/developmental level of the child
- hands-on experiential learning

Creative, committed educators: if you don't love kids, don't work with them!

Flexibility

- teach them what they want to know..don't "pre-package" your programs;

Fun!

- things that are fun are most often remembered and repeated;
- if you aren't having fun, you aren't doing it right!
- break out your kazoo and fun stuff---reacquaint yourself with your own sense of humor so you can have fun with your students.

Atmosphere – can enhance or kill your program

- open – allows the child to "try on" new behaviors and practice skills'
- accepting – by both peers and teachers – nonjudgmental
- freedom to ask questions without ridicule – no question is too dumb to ask
- encouragement, support and feedback
- risk free to develop rapport and support among class members

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FACILITATING and COACHING

You can't "teach" anyone anything – you are a facilitator in the learning process. You create a bridge, invite the children over that bridge and then destroy that bridge, encouraging them to build their own bridges of learning.

We are essentially health coaches when we work with kids and it is important to have the basic skills in coaching so that we are

- flexible
- accepting
- perceptive to the needs of individual children
- sensitive to feelings and problems
- empathetic – not a rescuer, but a bridge-builder

DEFINE YOUR ROLE

- Don't be a rescuer
- Provide a process not an answer
- Ask questions – encourage exploration

HONESTY

Kids hear what we say and then evaluate it at a personal level according to how they feel about how honest you have been with them.

***MOST KIDS HEAR WHAT YOU SAY
SOME KIDS DO WHAT YOU SAY
BUT MOST KIDS DO WHAT YOU DO.***

IS YOUR CLASS GOING TO MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE? WILL YOUR STUDENTS BE BETTER FOR HAVING BEEN THERE?

By definition, wellness is the process of being self-responsible for our physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. For us as adults, that makes sense. But how does it fit into the classroom curriculum and the life of a child?

Many of the most serious health and social/emotional problems facing us today have their origins in health behaviors and unmet developmental needs in childhood and youth. The first critical issues of the infant are social/emotional/physical – survival

and safety. With these needs successfully met the child can begin climbing the developmental ladder with confidence and will.

In most of my adult recovery programs, I find that if we peel back all the layers, we find a person whose initial primary childhood needs of safety, security and autonomy were neglected or undeveloped, leading to a lifetime of trying to fill the void.

Fundamental to this is the difference in the definition of wellness for adults as compared to children and youth. While adults often pursue wellness to re-think lifestyle choices, wellness for youth focuses on helping them make positive life choices even from early elementary and pre-school, or to at least providing the opportunity to experience what wellness choices can look like in the life of the child.

To make sure this is successful, it is necessary to take a serious developmental approach to the K-12 wellness. The same wellness topic takes on many different ‘faces’ through the developmental process of the child. Our understanding of a child’s stage-related development of health concepts is vital as we develop programs that will use their current aptitude and knowledge in conjunction with their current developmental needs. In doing so, we can create a useful model to help us develop programs that meet the needs of children at each stage of growth and development

Involved in the developmental process of the child is also the evolution of the child’s attitudes and understanding of their bodies and their health. Research has suggested that children with a developed internal locus of control are more knowledgeable about health and wellness (Wiehl and Tinsley 1999) than children more externally focused. An internal locus of control is a by product of successful cognitive and psychological development and in the practical sense of the process, evolves when the child has been exposed to activities and learning opportunities that allow her to “try on” various behaviors to observe the process and possible consequences.

It has always been difficult to get wellness programming included in the school curriculum. With the stress of meeting academic performance benchmarks, there is little time for in-depth wellness programming, even in early elementary. And yet, academic benchmarks cannot be easily met when children come to school unable to concentrate due to hunger, stress, physical problems or family issues and it has been shown over and over that positive mental and physical health influence academic performance. It’s a vicious circle and one not easily addressed. But it can be done.

Schools are still one of the most fertile grounds for wellness education. For many children school is where they are safe, cared for, taught, fed and encouraged. What is required is a school wide wellness philosophy, and wellness instruction across the educational spectrum, within the context of the curriculum. We need to become creative in integrating wellness programming within schools already pressed for time due to academic expectations. While wellness education may seem particularly important in elementary years, which it is, ironically, all this early knowledge is put

to the test as adolescents put that knowledge into practice...or not...based on their social/emotional needs at their age and stage of development

PRINCIPLES FOR WELLNESS TEACHING

1. If the learning situation is a part of “real life” or seems real to the student, he will perceive the relevance and be more eager to learn.
2. If the learner is actively participating, his interest is likely to be greater and achievement more rapid.
3. If the learner is mentally and emotionally involved in the learning situation, motivation and learning are increased.
4. If the student is involved in choosing the techniques to be used, he will be more accepting of the resulting situation.
5. If the chosen techniques help the student to experience success his self-worth and motivation will be enhanced.
6. If the student finds pleasure in learning situations, he is more likely to continue learning.
7. If the student develops skills for independent learning, he can continue to learn when no teacher is available to direct him.
8. If the student sees usefulness in his learning activities, motivation will be increased.
9. If the student develops positive attitudes towards learning, he will be more likely to continue learning independently.
10. If the learner discovers an intellectual relationship, he has greater joy in learning and greater interest in continued learning than when he is TOLD of the relationship.

A Framework for Designing Wellness Activities

Activities do not exist in a vacuum. Meaningful activities are well placed and have several critical elements:

Is learning relevant? Students need to see the connection between what they are learning and what happens to them in the real world.

Are activities culturally sensitive? Activities need to be presented in a context and language with which the student is familiar. Students bring to the learning environment their own cultural makeup and that of their communities. When activities are designed without sensitivity to the culture of the student, the benefit of the activity may well be lost.

Are activities engaging? Students learn best by doing. Learning objectives should include interactive, fun activities that involve all types of learners and sensory modalities. Learning by doing does not just involve activity sheets. While these are appropriate some of the time, activities must involve a variety of activity modes to engage the whole child.

Are activities simple to understand and execute
While the content may be complex, learning activities should be clear and easy to follow. The learning curve for any activity should be simple enough for students to catch on quickly and completely successfully within a time frame.

When facilitating group activities, pay attention to the following

- Make a bridge between activities. How do they relate?
- Introduce the theme of the activity. What makes it relevant to the student?
- Give directions and establish a common language for the activity.
- Encourage participation with emphasis on the individual AND the collective contributions of group member.
- Provide time to reflect on the activity. Otherwise it is diminished to “busy time.” Reflection helps students make connections between what they have done and how it generalizes to other subjects/behaviors/themes
 - What happened that was useful?
 - What are the implications for working together in the future?

Activities should promote the following:

- I accept you
- I approve of you
- I am satisfied with who you are today – not merely with what you may become later
- You have a right to your uniqueness. I do not need to change you.

- There is a constant quality within you that I like – even when it lies hidden beneath some of your actions
- I can care about you, even if I do not approve of everything you do or say
- I can separate your actions from you because I realize that you don't always do what you want to do that you are not always aware and in control – that you are struggling to be happy in the best way you know, just as I am. So you can fall on our face, change your mind, get in trouble – and I will not laugh or condemn you
- I will not call you names...I will not pin labels on you like “dumb” or “lazy” or “bad”
- Instead of making judgments about who you are, I will concentrate on how I feel about your actions
- I will not call you “bad”. But I will tell you if I feel “bad” about what you have done. In this way, you can know my limits and realize that you are lovable even though some of your actions are not
- You must know, however, that I am human, too and cannot be forever patient and tolerant. I am human, too and I, too need acceptance.