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### **Get Out And Play!**

**Like the rest of Americans, school-age children are becoming overweight at an alarming rate. But innovative health experts and gym teachers are introducing kids to the benefits--and joys-- of exercise through sports and games**

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The kids got up long before sunrise and went to school early because some grown-ups had offered them a chance to play. The grown-ups rose in darkness because they had an opportunity to use sports and games to fight, in a small way, the obesity that is rampant among young Americans. The kids and the grown-ups arrived at Parker Memorial, a public school for third- and fourth-graders in Tolland, Conn., just as the early autumn fog was lifting off the nearby green hills. The students tossed their backpacks and jackets onto a table and stormed into the small gymnasium. The adults tightened the laces on their sneakers and cued up a boom box. ¶ This sweet convergence of problem and solution was born last winter when Jaci VanHeest, an associate professor of kinesiology at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, was referred to Parker Memorial by representatives of a state health district that had received a small federal grant. "[Parker officials] felt that a lot of children were at risk for overweight and obesity," says VanHeest, 42, who has studied physiology and body-weight regulation for nearly two decades. "I asked them what they wanted. They said, 'We're not sure. What can you provide?' So we created a program that I had been thinking about for 15 years: Paw Pals." ¶ The name is derived from UConn's Husky mascot, and the concept is as simple as a game of tag. VanHeest and five of her master's and doctoral students "gave the kids exactly what does not exist today: free play," she says. "We did whatever they wanted to do, and we played with them."

The most delicate task was inviting students who were overweight or at risk of becoming so. "That was some letter to write," says VanHeest. "A lot of people were convinced we were ostracizing chubby kids." The program was made cool by its exclusivity--56 students were invited, but only the first 20 to sign up were accepted--and by the addition of a half-dozen popular kids of normal weight, some of them good athletes and all generous and mature.

On the first day of Paw Pals, last March 9, skeptical parents stood outside peering through the open gym doors. Children lined up against the wall, appearing terrified of the unfamiliar adults in their school. (Their gym teacher was not directly involved in the program because VanHeest didn't want the kids to think they were being forced into remedial phys ed at age nine.) VanHeest asked them what they wanted to play.

"Superman tag," said one pupil, breaking the silence. So they played Superman tag. They played an approximation of Harry Potter's sport, Quidditch, minus the flying brooms. For one hour every morning before school, through the end of May, the children played games that they themselves suggested. And something extraordinary happened: They discovered that they loved exercising. "My daughter couldn't wait to get up every morning and go to school," says Wendy Dunham, whose child, Mackenzie, was then in third grade. No statistics were kept, but parents reported to VanHeest that their children were losing weight. Teachers said

the kids were more alert in the classroom.

The children finished every session by huddling in the middle of the floor, joining hands--like a team before a game--and shouting, "One, two, three ... Paw Pals!" On the last day UConn's mascot, Jonathan the Husky, participated in the play activities. In the hallway outside the gym other Parker students awaited their chance to shake hands with the Big Dog.

The program was resumed in late September, and this time it runs throughout the school year and weight statistics are being kept. (The program will remain limited to roughly 25 students, including the half-dozen normal-weight kids.) VanHeest acted as announcer for relay races on four-wheeled plastic scooters, and the children yelped deliriously. Instead of Superman tag, this time they played octopus tag. When the session was finished at 8:30 a.m., as sunlight streamed through the high windows on the gym walls, Jacqueline David, a nine-year-old fourth-grader returning to Paw Pals for a second year, stood in the middle of the floor, smiling as if it were Christmas and sweating like Mia Hamm after a breakaway run. "It's morning," she said. "Normally you wouldn't invite all your friends over to play a game of tag right now, but we come here every morning. It's fun."

Sure, it's fun to play. Back in the day, my friends and I in Whitehall, N.Y., never stopped playing. Tackle football on the sloping lawn of the coat factory off Kirtland Street. Two-hand touch under the lights in the new Grand Union parking lot after closing time. Basketball on the three half courts outside the old high school or the full court at the playground over on the other side of the barge canal. Exercise? I had to ride my bike a couple of miles just to get to either of those places. It was that or stay home and play in my driveway, channeling Walt Frazier or Pete Maravich. On summer nights there was kickball in the middle of the well-lit street, or hide-and-seek in the darkness. Home was just a place to eat and sleep. In the house for dinner and back out again. Never stopped sweating. Nobody told me I was working out. It just happened. It happened to all of us.

So it was that sports and games inoculated kids against sloth for most of the 20th century. Play was organized not by university scholars--or by overzealous parents living vicariously through their offspring--but by the children themselves, simply because it was fun and because (let's be frank) there was little else to do with idle time. "Nobody worked at being active; you had to be active," says James O. Hill, professor of pediatrics and medicine at the University of Colorado at Denver's Health Sciences Center. Kids were healthy and fit almost by habit.

Now they are not playing, and many of them are not healthy. "Obesity is soon going to overwhelm all other health issues in this country," says pediatrician Tom Robinson, director of the Center for Healthy Weight at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford University.

According to a survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (box, page 88), an estimated 15% of children ages six to 19 were overweight in 2000, when the report was completed. (The CDC does not apply the term obese to children. It defines overweight as at or above the 95th percentile in the Body Mass Index [a height, weight and, in children, age correlation], which corresponds to the definition of obese in adults.) The percentage of children who were overweight more than tripled from 1974 to 2000 in the six-to-11 age group and more than doubled among 12- to-19-year-olds. As a result, type 2 diabetes, once a disease of the middle-aged and elderly, is increasingly found in kids.

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