

Back to school, back to good health

By AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION NEWS



With summer drawing to a close, back-to-school season not only is a time to stock up on supplies, it's also an opportunity to encourage kids to eat healthy, be active and avoid secondhand smoke.

A smoke-free environment can promote children's brain development, prevent addictions and lead to healthier lifestyles later on, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. All forms of tobacco and nicotine are unhealthy — cigarettes, cigars, hookahs and e-cigarettes.

Parents can help by not using tobacco, keeping houses and cars tobacco-free and avoiding places that would expose kids to secondhand smoke.

"The first thing I do is lead by example," said Rani Whitfield, M.D., a family physician in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and a volunteer for the American Heart Association. "I'm emphatic about not smoking."

Whitfield, known as "Tha Hip Hop Doc," uses the music genre to educate children and young adults — including his own 10-year-old daughter — about health issues that negatively impact the community.

Whitfield also plans fun activities to ensure his daughter gets an hour of physical activity each day.

"She doesn't know she's exercising," he said.

Even kids who aren't athletic can be active, Whitfield said. The activity doesn't have to be sports-specific, but it does need to be age-appropriate, he said.

Schools also play a role in encouraging students to keep moving and to eat nutritious foods. Such lessons help lower the risk of obesity and obesity-related diseases such as diabetes and early heart disease, according to the CDC.

Beyond physical health, healthy eating and physical activity are also linked to academic success, the CDC said.

Whitfield encourages parents to pay attention to school lunch menus and to pack a healthy lunch on days without healthy options.

Parents who want to improve school lunches “have to be aggressive,” Whitfield said. They can organize town hall meetings about school nutrition and write letters to the local school board demanding better meals, he said.

More than a third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese in 2012, according to the CDC.

“We have to continually give these messages to our young people and our family and friends,” Whitfield said. “Not in a preaching way — let me do the preaching in the doctor’s office. Leading by example is key.”

For more ideas, visit the following links:

- [How to make a healthy school lunch](#)
- [Devin Alexander’s back to school healthy lunch ideas](#)