



Danyne Romine Powell

Lessons on exercise are child's play

There ought to be an axiom that goes something like this:

If kids are standing up and having fun, both their feet will lift from the floor at intervals too frequent to count.

So it was on Monday, when two classes of 3-year-olds at Providence Baptist Preschool circled up, one at a time, to learn about the benefits of physical exercise with coach Janis Smith of the fitness program for children, Stretch-n-Grow.

Not that the kids knew they were learning.

These near-dozen tykes in each class – the boys outnumbering the girls – thought they were just pretending to pedal a bike, fly like a bird or shake a stuffed Shrek nearly to oblivion by grabbing the edges of a silk parachute and pumping it into a tumult.

You should've seen them.

No taller than yardsticks, limber as raw liver, these little guys and gals were as sunny a group as I've seen in a while.

And without realizing it, they were being hard-wired for a lifetime with the basics of fitness and a positive attitude about exercise.

Fun, not fear

"Is your heart beating fast?" Smith asks.

Tiny hands to their washboard chests.

"Yeah!" they chorus. "Mine is! Yeah!"

"Fast heartbeats make strong hearts," Smith says.

Lesson over. Back to the glee of running and jumping.

As adults, our lessons about exercise are rarely joyful. Extra pounds, statistics tell us, can lead to heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer and early death.

Take it off or die.

Pretty scary. And not much fun.

But these kids are ahead. Their only extra fat so far is in their cheeks, which bounce with good health as they run around and around with colorful streamers to the song, "Who Let the Dogs Out?"

"Good job," says Smith.

"Good job."

Calories, schmalories

Time for another quick lesson: Fire safety.

The girls and boys find their spots in the circle, each sitting on a cardboard star.

"How many have a fireplace in your house?"

"I do!" "I do!" "I do!"

"When there's a fire in the fireplace, do we stick our hands in?"

"No-oh!" "No-oh!" "No-oh!"

"Do we touch a candle when it's burning?"

"No-oh!" "No-oh!" "No-oh!"

Nobody seems to know the number to call in case of emergency, but they chime in with other numbers.

"Five-five," says one. "Seven-seven," says another.

Up off the floor.

"Let's move our feet real fast," says Smith. "Twist, twist, twist. Now who's ready to be a big spider?"

On the floor, bottoms up, they wiggle their legs way out.

"Good job," says Smith.

"Give yourself a big hand."

"Yea!" "Yea!" "Yea!"

How many collective calories burned?

I haven't a clue.

How many little bodies discovering that exercise is more fun than sitting in a corner eating a plum pie?

Every single one. Well, except maybe for Shrek.

Danyne: (704) 358-5230;

dpowell@charlotteobserver.com.