

‘Fit Kids Fit Future’ Teaches Key Movements for Life

Issue: What percentage of children and adults can do a push-up, chin-up, lunge, air squat, or touch their toes? The number might surprise you, says Tammy Alcott, SHAPE America member and recently retired physical education (PE) teacher from Waterville Junior-Senior High School in Waterville, NY. A 30-year teaching veteran, she was shocked to see that 78 percent of her seventh-graders couldn’t do an “old-fashioned” push-up; 90 percent couldn’t do a chin-up; and many could not perform other basic movements that signify strength and conditioning.

“It was astonishing that middle-school kids couldn’t do a basic air squat [sitting down on, or standing up from a chair without using their hands],” she says. “Their knees would collapse, or they would bend over trying to perform this simple lifelong skill.” It raised a more important question: If they can’t do it now, is it going to get better as they age? “Not unless they practice it,” she says.

Alcott also observed that some of the

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, *Let’s Move!* Active Schools (now Active Schools) and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.



Fit Kids Fit Future represents a paradigm shift in PE — away from a sport unit focus toward a concentration on individual lifelong fitness, where students learn how to be fit and healthy now and into adulthood.

students who most needed to learn fitness skills were dropping out of the PE rotation. “They couldn’t do the things we asked them to do and weren’t into team sports,” she says. Alcott turned to Josh Lewis of Waterville’s Garage Gym to help her create a solution-focused health and PE curriculum. As an adult strength and conditioning coach, Lewis routinely worked with clients who were suffering from back and knee pain, poor balance, and other issues that inhibited their enjoyment of many activities.

The Big Idea: Together, Alcott and Lewis developed a curriculum built around 11 “universal movements” — biomarkers of strength and mobility leading to lifelong fitness and health — which she could teach in her middle school and high school health and PE classes.

“Fit Kids Fit Future” represents a paradigm shift in the way PE is conceived — moving away from a “sport unit” focus toward a focus on individual lifelong fitness, says Alcott. “By putting the ‘education’ back into physical education, students learn in the

gym and the health classroom what they need to do to be fit and healthy now and into adulthood,” she explains. “It provides a clear path to improving performance on each movement, transcending the standard ‘how-many-reps-can-you-do’ mindset.”

Progressions for each universal movement are based on individual performance, allowing each student to participate and succeed at their own pace and level. “The beauty of it is that a student who is morbidly obese can use a yoga block to do push-ups next to a basketball star who can do 20,” she says. “And both can feel good about themselves.”

Implementation: After Alcott introduced the Fit Kids Fit Future curriculum in her school, a typical PE class then began with well-choreographed warm-up sessions using the universal movements, which included push-ups, chin-ups, lunges, air squats, front planks, side bridges, and jumping rope. The remainder of the class involved an “adventure game” that reinforced the movements and tapped into kids’ universal love of playing games. To foster leadership,

students were challenged to design, teach and coach their own games built around the movements.

For example, a student who had been legally blind since the third grade, wanted to teach her classmates how to play “blind kickball,” which she had learned at a camp in the Adirondacks. Alcott contacted Central New York Association for the Blind and obtained the needed equipment. Wearing blindfolds, the students had to try to kick a beeping ball through a series of electronic cones. This student got a confidence-boost from her leadership role — and her classmates got to experience PE through her eyes.

“The kids really took ownership in the gym and learned what it’s like to have a disability,” says Alcott. “There was never any bullying.” Students kept score for each other, and individual performance scores for each movement were aggregated into a total fitness testing score. The data obtained in pre- and post-testing provided valid, tangible growth measurements.

In health class, Alcott taught students the “why” behind the movements, linking them to the specific activities of daily living they will need for a healthy adulthood. She knew she had made an impression when she overheard a student in the hall say, “There’s Mrs. Alcott! She wants us to practice our air squats to keep us out of the nursing home!”

The minimal equipment used in the Fit Kids Fit Future program, such as jump ropes and chin-up bars, can be purchased very inexpensively — and movements like

squats, toe-touches, and push-ups require no props and little floor space. “As adults, it’s not necessary to spend lots of money on equipment or belong to a gym in order to stay fit,” Alcott points out. “These are things people can even do in a hotel room when traveling.”

Takeaway: The simplicity of the Fit Kids Fit Future program has proved to be a real eye-opener to both kids and adults, say its creators. Its focus on lifelong fitness motivates students to participate, learn and improve. “The real motivator for me is that the program is instilling a real-world knowledge base for students, so they can chase greatness in life,” says Lewis. “It gets kids to embrace responsibility for their own health.”

Results: During the Fit Kids Fit Future program’s 2015-16 debut in the Waterville Central School District, more than 83 percent of the 289 students showed a marked improvement in their “Total Fit and Ready” overall fitness scores. Alcott and Lewis quickly realized the program could have a much wider application. With the help of a scientist, two curriculum editors, and a social worker, they made sure that all the lessons were aligned with the National Standards, and gained the support of the New York State Board of Cooperative Education Services. Fit Kids Fit Future is now being marketed to schools throughout New York and the United States. To date, it has been embraced in five other states.

When schools purchase the Fit Kids Fit Future curriculum (New York state schools that purchase Fit Kids Fit Future curriculum

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are eligible for state aid), Alcott and Lewis provide four hours of in-person professional development for teachers so they learn how to administer it. “We’ve had nothing but positive feedback,” she says. “The teachers quickly see that it makes their job easier.”

She is excited to see schools like Sherburne-Earlville Elementary in Sherburne, NY infuse the Fit Kids Fit Future program across the curriculum — and to see how much the students embrace it. “It’s amazing to see a line of children walking down the hall and stopping to do air squats while joining the teacher in reciting math facts,” she says. “Kids used to line up to try to get out of the PE rotation, and once we started the program, they stopped me in the hall to ask if they could come to PE even when it wasn’t their ‘day,’ or if they could take my health class twice. That says it all.”



SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

- ✓ Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- ✓ Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- ✓ Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- ✓ Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- ✓ Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

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