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KIDS FITNESS

Building a better you

Getting kids on the right track

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They will do exercises worthy of Olympians and train on equipment developed by Navy SEALs.

Starting at the rowing machines, they will move onto a circuit-training workout — from boxing, to the jump rope, to tossing the medicine ball — and finish with a light jog.

It is a new kids' fitness and nutrition program at the Alper Jewish Community Center in West Kendall, with parents as equal partners. Called Team Fit, the program is supported by the United Way and Baptist Health, whose dieticians will teach the nutrition classes. It targets 8- to 12-year-olds who are obese or at risk of becoming so, said Meg McCarthy, director of the fitness center at Alper JCC.

"We thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could get the kids at a younger age and introduce them to physical fitness,'" McCarthy said. "If we could get it [obesity] before it gets out of control, that would be wonderful."

In 2010, more than 26 percent of Floridians were obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nationally, the percentage of obese 6- to 11-year-olds jumped from 7 percent of kids in that age group to about 20 percent, or one in five, between 1980 and 2008. During the same period, the percentage of 12- to 19-year-olds who were obese increased from 5 percent to 18 percent.

More than a third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese in 2008.

To tackle this problem, Team fit is incorporating group workouts, including kung fu, tennis, basketball, baseball, yoga and Pilates, with circuit training, which incorporates various stations and equipment to work the entire body. Children will even get to try TRX, a suspension-training workout originating from the Navy SEALs. The workout develops strength, balance, flexibility and core muscles.

Beating your own record — and not that of another program participant — is the goal.

"Every child really is competing against themselves," McCarthy said. "We don't want them to feel like, 'I can't keep up with May or I can't keep up with Bob.'"

Parents, too, get involved. On Saturdays, parents will take a one-hour nutrition class, while their children play sports or exercise. For the following hour, children will go to the nutrition class, while the parents join one of the group-fitness classes or use the center's fitness equipment.

"We want mom, dad, the brothers and the sisters to get involved, so the child would have moral support," McCarthy said.

Added Dana Cohen, critical nutrition manager at Baptist Hospital: "The parents are the ones bringing the food into the home. If the parents don't know about it (nutrition), and the children know about it, then nothing would change." Topics at the nutrition classes include reading product labels, portion control and selecting lean meats, whole wheat-based food, fruits and veggies at the grocery store.

"Eating healthy is not a punishment," McCarthy said.

The nutrition class will emphasize what Cohen says is the hardest part of a healthy meal: Planning it. With planning, parents should be more likely to toss out the chips and cookies and substitute them with fruit and veggies.

"Parents are really busy," Cohen said. "They buy a lot of convenience items and just shove it in a lunchbox."

Team Fit, however, is not a quick weight-loss fix.

"We are not expecting a huge weight loss in eight weeks," Cohen said. "But we are expecting some habit changes. I hope it is a change for life."