

Liverpool 'health mates'

6th formers are to be paid to act as 'health mates' and mentor younger children in a bid to cut obesity in Liverpool.

More than 300 teenagers aged 16 to 18 will be recruited to provide advice and guidance to 11 year olds who are overweight. The aim is to get them interested in activities that burn calories such as cooking, dancing or exercise. The scheme will also help prepare 6th formers for the world of work, as they will have to meet performance targets in order to receive payment in gift and travel vouchers.

Young People's plan

The scheme is part of a massive drive to improve the health and well being of youngsters, proposed in Liverpool's Children and Young People's plan. Half of 11 year old boys and 40% of 11 year old girls in Liverpool are overweight. 1 in 20 is clinically obese and 1 in 3 do not do enough exercise.

The plan aims to cut the number of overweight or obese kids by a half in the next 3 years, and get all youngsters taking part in 2 hours of exercise per week.

Influence of peers

Councillor Paul Klein, executive member for children's services, said:- "The opinions of young people have formed the basis for this plan. They spoke and we listened. It is a fact that youngsters are far more easily influenced by their peers than by adults. We can use the admiration that they have for older teenagers and influence them in a positive way. We are committed to

working with partners in health, the police and the voluntary sector to improve life for young people, and the plan sets some challenging targets which we have to meet."

Priorities

4 key priorities have been identified as part of the Children and Young People's Plan. They are:

- ♦ Reducing childhood obesity and promoting a culture of physical activity
- ♦ Reducing the risk of abuse, bullying and anti social behaviour
- ♦ Improving the achievements of children in care, from ethnic minorities and young carers
- ♦ Improving early diagnosis and family support for disabled and special needs children

Council leader Warren Bradley said:- "Today's kids are tomorrow's adults and we must do all we can to give them the best possible start in order to prevent them facing health problems in later life. Overweight youngsters are more likely to be bullied and that can have a knock on effect on their confidence and potential to achieve at school. It is vital we break the couch potato habit and tackle the growing problem of child obesity by finding innovative ways of getting them off out of the house and taking part in physical activity. Our groundbreaking kids' gyms and games consoles on fitness equipment are already enticing youngsters into our Lifestyles leisure centres, and we will build on our success in these areas. Teaching youngsters

the importance of eating healthily and getting fit will help them develop habits that last a lifetime."

Free Lifestyles facilities

As part of the plan to reduce obesity, from 1st May 2006, 60,000 youngsters are getting free use of the city's Lifestyles facilities, including swimming and gym facilities after school, at weekends and during school holidays. The city is also pledging to create 50 new activity play areas in school, deliver healthier meals and work with food stores to help parents ensure their children eat healthily.

After school activity

The city council also wants to reduce youth nuisance by 30% through supporting the development of after school activity and providing diversionary activity at libraries and leisure centres. Improved family support and assessment procedures will bring the number of youngsters on the Child Protection Register down by 20%.

Bullying

The plan also proposes that the number of 11 to 15 year olds who are bullied is halved over the next 3 years through the training of anti bullying mentors in schools, extra training for children's services staff and maintaining the Bully Busters helpline.

This article is based on a press release and further updates from Paul Johnston, Broadcast News Officer, Liverpool City Council Newscentre.