

A League's Role in Promoting Healthy Eating

Sport organizations are responsible for league structure and effectiveness. Organizations take many precautions to protect kids from injury, make rules and promote the health of youth. Coaches, parents, and players look to the organization for guidance and regulations. To have these regulations in writing and enforced is a primary role of any organization. The survival and productivity of a sport organization depends on efficient structure.

A well-balanced and nutritious diet is important for young athletes. It supports growing bodies, keeps them healthy, and gives them the fuel to perform their best. Eating healthfully now sets the stage for a healthy lifestyle as young adults and adults. For young athletes, it is especially important to get the right amount, and the right kinds, of foods.

Kids in sports

Youth who play sports are more physically active than youth who do not, but surprisingly they are just as likely to be overweight. Just being in sports is not enough to keep kids healthy – they need to balance how much they eat with how much activity they get. In fact, youth who play sports eat more fast food and drink more sugar-sweetened beverages--like soda pop and sports drinks. Those foods and drinks provide extra things most kids don't need, like sugar, unhealthy fats, salt, and calories.

Start by making your 'home team' strong

1. Have a vision for safety, well-being and health. Within your organization develop a vision statement or purpose statement that includes physical activity and healthy nutrition. This will help focus and drive the goals of your organization.
 - a. Your vision or purpose statement should support your organization's overall mission statement if one exists.
 - b. Consider including statements like:
 - i. "To promote a positive and enthusiastic environment at [organization's name] where our youth can enjoy physical activity and healthy foods and beverages."
 - ii. "To promote only healthy foods and beverages for our youth at [organization's name] to fuel their bodies and minds for peak performance."
 - iii. "Healthy bodies are fueled with healthy foods. It is our mission to promote and provide only healthy foods for our youth. Encourage healthy behaviors with these foods and physical activity."
 - iv. "To promote healthy youth development through physical activity and healthy eating in a supportive environment."
 - v. "In addition to providing your child with the best [name of sport] instruction, the [organization's name] is focused on bettering general health and well-being. As part of this mission, we take every opportunity to offer healthy food and beverage choices."
2. Set reasonable goals around physical activity and nutritional foods and beverages.
 - a. Take into consideration and pursue both short- and long-term goals.
 - b. Get ideas from all individuals who have an influence on creating the organization's goals.
 - c. Aim for reasonable, measureable, and obtainable goals rather than on vague statements that do not meet your purpose statement.
 - d. Understand that over time goals may change and this is acceptable. All goals do not need to be permanent.

3. Organize a Wellness Coalition, designate a Wellness Ambassador or create a position on your organizations board to oversee and assure healthy nutrition is supported, which may include decreasing less healthy choices and providing more healthy foods and beverages.
4. Set guidelines and policies for foods and beverages consumed during practice and events. Unless players are practicing/playing for 1 hour or more they should be drinking water only. Long practices with hot and humid conditions and where the athlete sweats a lot deserve special considerations.
5. For tournaments or events your organization hosts, sell healthy food and beverages at reasonable prices and limit less healthy food options. If kids are around less healthy food, they are going to want that food.
6. Display healthy food and beverage items more prominently than less healthy items. Highlight healthy foods on your menu board so they stand out.
7. For tournaments or events your organization hosts, focus on non-food items as your main fundraiser rather than unhealthy foods. For example, consider selling tournament t-shirts or clothing, buttons, a silent auction of memorabilia, etc. Use your imagination!
8. Check in periodically with coaches and parents to see how promotion of healthy foods is going. Keep communication open and be open for suggestions!
9. Develop a venue health promotion report card, which might include food, safety, and no tolerance of drugs or tobacco.
10. Limit the number of posters marketing professional athletes consuming sports drinks and other items that promote less healthy foods and beverages.
11. Provide parents with a snack list of healthy food options to bring for athletes and enforce the list! Consider banning or limiting the post-game snacks at youth sport events and practices. Have a post-game snack once a month as a social event rather than after every game/practice.
12. Consider a policy around family meals, which states not having events or practices during dinnertime.
13. Emphasis on eating healthy foods should focus on healthy body image for players and not on appearance or “making weight”.
14. Change can be hard at first and may take time – be enthusiastic and stand behind your vision statement!

Feed your organization and athletes’ bodies what they need!