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Active Kids Reach Their Peak: Why Physical Activity Matters and How You Can Make a Difference

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This has been a great morning—one that will change our children’s lives for the better. The announcements we heard today exemplify the Partnership’s approach to eliminating childhood obesity: bring together a wide range of leaders, from all sectors—public, private and non-profit—who then develop big, bold commitments that offer real potential to keep our children healthy.

As a Foundation president, sitting here and watching these announcements unfold has filled me with optimism and joy. But I’m also a physician. And the physician in me has a different perspective.

What were we doing as we listened to those great announcements? Sitting. *Sitting*. We were physically inactive all morning.

Inactivity is bad for your health. It weakens muscles and slows the body’s metabolism. It deconditions your heart. Prolonged sitting—whether you’re a child in a classroom, or an adult attending a conference like this one—is just plain unhealthy.

I’ve been asked to kick off a conversation about increasing children’s physical activity, and we are not going to do it sitting down. All across the country, schools are adding short activity breaks to their daily schedules that get kids moving—whenever and wherever they have the chance. We’re about to join them.

Everybody stand up. We’re going to do a Jammin’ Minute. Just like all the RWJF trustees do when we visit schools.

(Note to readers: A Jammin’ Minute video plays at this point in the presentation.)

Nice job. I feel better. Do you feel better? Thanks for getting out of your comfort zone. I know that was an unexpected diversion. When a new speaker reaches the podium, you figure you can relax—you don’t expect that you’re going to have to move your body.

Expectations are funny things, aren't they? When there's a meeting from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.—and we've all been to a million of those, right?! When there's a long meeting, you don't expect to be active, but you do expect a couple of coffee breaks and lunch. It's a social norm, a basic expectation for meetings and conferences.

It's similar for kids. We send them to school for six or seven hours each day. Everyone gets a lunch period, but only 2 percent of high schools in the United States provide daily physical education for their students. Two percent!

And that's part of the reason why only one in 13 American teenagers achieves the level of physical activity recommended by the CDC.

And it drops as children get older. They're active in the elementary school years, but we lose them in middle school and high school. The drop-off is stunning!

Is more PE the answer? Yes. What about short activity breaks? That, too. Using parks, pools, and bike paths? And families moving together? Yes, yes, YES! All of these things are critical, but it's going to take even more to get our kids moving again. More vision and more creativity.

Solutions will come from the places you'd least expect.

Consider this: five years ago, playing video games meant sitting hunched over on the couch, maybe with a bowl of chips nearby. Video games represented everything we were working against.

But creative developers realized it didn't have to be that way. They built a new generation of products, and now gamers can dance, jump, and even play tennis right in their living rooms.

And progress doesn't have to be high-tech or expensive. In DeKalb County, Ga., local planners catalyzed greater use of existing parks by adding new entrances. They did some research, and found that when residents had no choice but to drive to a park that had no sidewalks, no bikepath and no easy way to enter the park without a car, they were much less likely to go.

But when residents could enter a park from any side, when there were footpaths leading from nearby homes, more people used the park. So the county put its research into action. They added more entrances—and sometimes built new sidewalks to improve access. And now the parks are busier than ever.

We all have a role to play when it comes to encouraging physical activity. It's not just PE teachers and pro athletes. Video game makers can be part of the solution. Urban planners can help. And so can all of you.

I challenge everyone in this room to come up with three ideas to increase children's physical activity. Come to the physical activity breakout sessions this afternoon and share your thoughts.

I see positive examples of kids being more active all across the country, but we still have a long way to go. We must put physical activity back into our kids' lives so they can grow up to be healthy and strong.

They say a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. You just keep putting one foot in front of the other, and there's no telling how far you can go.

I know.

Earlier this year, I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro with my daughter, Rel. We're not athletes. Heck, I was one of those kids who was always the last to be picked for any team on the playground. Even today, no one would call us mountaineers—especially me. But we're persistent, and we enjoy being physically active.

It was an amazingly inspiring trip.

There's a feeling you get when climb onto the last ridge and you can see Uhuru Peak, like right here! That's when you know you're going to make it. Nothing can stop you from reaching your goal.

I want all children to have that feeling. They will have different mountains to climb—literally and figuratively—but they deserve the opportunity to reach their peak. It is up to us to help all kids be physically active so they can see the world from the summit. Let's do it!

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