

Health and Fitness: Young Students Run to Summer, but Not All Summer

By Caroline Purtle

Photo: courtesy of AVF and Jenny Hartgrove Photography

Kids file in one by one, but nonetheless fidgety, chatting up their classmates. Sitting in a classroom all day while learning basic curriculum, students are seen bouncing their legs up and down and trying their hardest to focus. Physical Education (PE) is the one class that allows students to expel this energy, letting kids be kids. “Don’t you wish you could be that age again?” [Cowan Elementary](#) PE teacher Candace Cotton says as she watches her students eagerly play tag.

As the last days for Texas public schools approaches, children of all ages anticipate the summer, where for several months they have unstructured time to fill their days. While taking a break from their intensive learning is refreshing, a long absence of physical activity can lead to major health concerns later in their adulthood. Some after-school and summer programs may carry a high price tag, but the city of Austin and its communities prioritize offering cheaper alternatives for locals.

Childhood physical inactivity influences a student’s health greatly, according to a study by the National Academy of Medicine (NAM). “A lack of activity increases the risk of heart disease, colon and breast cancer, diabetes mellitus, hypertension,

osteoporosis, anxiety and depression and others diseases.” It is this time in their adolescent lives to preemptively reduce future health problems.

NAM’s study also tells of the benefit for kids to participate in “physical education programs” because it inspires students to engage in healthy habits for a lifetime. Its value doesn’t end there, “adequate physical activity during puberty may be especially important for optimal bone development and prevention [of severe obesity], as puberty is a critical developmental period.”

Leslie Carey, Cowan PTA President, says they organize an annual fitness charity event called “Fun Run” in March during the school year in order to bring together the local community, allowing participants of all ages, while getting a head start on summer fitness.

Cowan also has emplaced other early initiatives during the school year, like several after-school programs are offered to accommodate working families and guardians; one in specifically is offered year-round, promoting physical activities and good habits-- [Austin Youth Fitness \(AYF\)](#).

Head of AYF and PE teacher at Casis Elementary, Larry Chauvin says, “physical education is so important, not only to students' health, but research shows the benefits of how movement and brain breaks help in the classroom too.” AYF offers summer

programs specializing in endurance running, obstacle course racing, biking and children's yoga.

PE teacher, Cotton, also emphasizes the need for physical activity in young children, and offers alternatives for students and their homes to fulfill this requirement.

"It's easy for kids to exercise," says Cotton. "It's as simple as playing outside, or walking a dog, or just swimming. [I think] the important thing is just for [students] to get outside."

Cotton is not wrong, especially with today's video-game-driven-environment. One family has found similar alternatives.

"[This summer], me and my brother are doing a karate camp," says 9-year-old Greg Carberry. "It's hard sometimes; I like [karate] a lot. It makes me feel like an Avenger."

Not all families have time though, or the dispensable income, to admit their children in programs like Carberry and his brother. Luckily, the city of Austin and its natural beauty has government and local foundations to concentrate on preserving and curating summer events for the public. The [Summer Playgrounds Program](#) is a prime example of just that.

“The main goal of the program,” says representative Davin Bjornaas from Austin’s Parks and Recreation Department (PARAD), “is to keep children both physically active and mentally engaged during the out-of-school-time months of summer. We do so much with that program, from providing endless active play, to free nutritious meals, to enrichment activities, and much, much more.”

Another PARAD event is on June 30 called Keep Austin Playing. It’s free to the public, and its purpose is to enrich, educate and empower the Austin community to cultivate healthy lifestyle changes.

“It’s an opportunity for families to learn about community wide programs that offer fun recreational activities for kids,” says Bjornaas. Keep Austin Playing will feature portable climbing walls, inflatable batting cage, obstacle courses, bike rodeo, human foosball, obstacle course, tailgate games, face painting and prizes.

Austin’s PARAD also provides [scholarships](#) for all youth programs in an effort to limit financial barriers associated with participating in their paid programs. “These scholarships help children all over Austin attend our paid summer camps at local recreation centers,” says Bjornaas. “[The scholarships] also reduce in half the costs of participating in our youth sports, such as summer basketball, tee-ball, baseball and swim lessons.”

Cowan is considered a medium to large elementary school located in the more southern part of Austin. The city has seen some substantial growth over the years, and likewise the schools have as well.

“We are seeing some incoming lower socioeconomic subsidized housing that’s opened up in the area, so we have students with higher needs now,” says Cowan Elementary Assistant Principal Rebecca Phillips, “[the kids from lower socioeconomic levels] is a very small percentage, but I would say it’s starting to creep-up. Probably less than ten percent.”

Still, Cowan’s overall composition of their enrollment are mainly students from “middle-class” families, says Phillips. Other Austin area schools have larger enrollment of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and more ethnic minorities. A study from the [Journal of Physical Education](#) highlights the need for appropriate physical activity regarding race and gender.

Students of color, as well as the female sub-population, performed the lowest in their physical fitness exams, according to the Journal of Physical Education. “This relevance might require physical educators to examine differences in student interests, backgrounds and culture.”

Whatever a school's approach in PE may be, Chauvin thinks breaking down social barriers and the childhood reluctance of participating in physical activity is about the basic principle, letting kids be kids.

"[AVF's] goal in PE is not to make students love sports, but to learn that physical education and exercise should be fun, should involve friends, and should happen as often as possible," says Chauvin. "It's not just about running the track, but getting out and playing a game, taking a hit, or walking or biking to school works just as well."

Students will naturally fidget, bounce their legs up and down or poke their classmates because they're reckless. When the final bell of the school year rings, it is highly recommended that families seek out summer community programs. Children shouldn't strike out with their health; they need the opportunity to hit a homerun for their team, and more importantly, their future.



Children participate in AVF's running camp Young Guns. Photo by Jenny Hartgrove Photography.