

Using NYC FITNESSGRAM to Support Student Well-being An FAQ for Educators

WHY DO WE USE THE NYC FITNESSGRAM ASSESSMENT?

There is a national childhood obesity epidemic, and New York City youth are not immune from the current and lifelong health consequences of being overweight. Medical research shows that healthy and fit children have less absenteeism, are better able to learn, have higher self-esteem, and are at lower risk for developing chronic diseases. Therefore, a key goal in quality physical education (PE) is to provide youth and families with information about children's levels of health-related fitness.

FITNESSGRAM was created in 1982 by a national scientific advisory board. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) began using the assessment in 2005. Schools cannot provide a complete solution for the approximately 40% of our students who are overweight and obese, but strong PE instruction including annual NYC FITNESSGRAM reports for families is one way to support student health and academic performance.

HOW CAN TEACHERS COMMUNICATE THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT WELLNESS TO SCHOOL STAFF?

Every member of your school community is vested in the success of all students. Both common sense and research tell us that physical activity can lower stress levels, increase focus, and reduce inappropriate behaviors. Teachers can collaborate and communicate by:

- Sharing information with colleagues about the link between health and fitness levels and academic achievement, including [research](#) published by the DOE and NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene using NYC FITNESSGRAM data that demonstrate this connection among our students.
- Incorporating fitness and health concepts as part of your lesson planning.
- Using aggregated NYC FITNESSGRAM results for a school staff presentation showing where your school's student population falls within the Healthy Fitness Zone (remember to keep individual student reports and data confidential).
- Using NYC FITNESSGRAM results to begin conversations about forming a [School Wellness Council](#) or getting PE/physical activity program improvements on the agenda of your existing council.
- Providing ideas for how classroom physical activity breaks can reinforce academic concepts through movement.

HOW CAN TEACHERS COMMUNICATE THE BENEFITS OF HEALTH AND FITNESS TO STUDENTS?

Talk with students about the major concepts related to health and fitness:

- Energy intake and expenditure to maintain a healthy weight (calories in and calories out)
- Guidelines for healthy eating (see choosemyplate.gov)
- Factors that affect body composition, such as genetics, diet, and overall physical activity levels

Explain the connections between the areas of health-related fitness:

- Aerobic activities enhance how well the heart and lungs perform during physical activity and expend calories (PACER assessment).
- Developing strong muscles helps to prevent injury, and support proper body function; muscle cells also expend more calories at rest (trunk lift, push-up, and curl-up assessments).



- Flexibility helps prevent injury and helps the body move properly for everyday tasks; especially during aerobic and muscular strength activities (sit and reach assessment).
- Nutrition also plays an important role in body composition and overall health-related fitness.

Encourage positive self-image and emphasize that bodies come in all sizes and shapes.

- Affirm for students that they don't need to be star athletes or members of a sports team to be healthy, active, and fit.
- Approach conversations about body composition objectively and with sensitivity. If you are comfortable and confident in discussing this topic, your students will be too.
- Never use a student as a positive or negative example of body composition.
- Emphasize that a person who is "overweight" because of genetics can still greatly reduce health risks by being physically active and developing good nutrition habits.

Validate and promote student involvement in physical activity outside of class time and the school setting:

- Emphasize the connections among physical activity, nutrition, and health through examples from physical education instruction, recreational activities, and daily life.
- For elementary students, share the [Physical Activity Pyramid](#) for children and discuss the various types of activities that can help a person stay healthy.
- For secondary school students, discuss the idea that not everyone needs to be an athlete, but everyone does need to develop fitness by participating in activity as part of living a healthy lifestyle.

HOW CAN TEACHERS COMMUNICATE ABOUT NYC FITNESSGRAM TO FAMILIES?

Consider how family communications about your class occur throughout the school year. Send home an [introduction letter](#) that provides families with an overview of your PE class and how NYC FITNESSGRAM fits into it. Look for opportunities throughout the school year to highlight the importance of physical fitness and its link to student achievement. Use Tuesday's parent engagement time to plan for opportunities to engage families in supporting their child's health and fitness. Here are some ideas from PE teachers:

- At the beginning of the school year, set up a table in the lobby with handouts about the PE program, NYC FITNESSGRAM, and physical activity options at your school. This could occur during a curriculum night or at the first Parents Association meeting of the year. Ask students to be at the table with you to share their fitness goals and ideas. Elicit the participation of students with a range of fitness and athletic ability, and aim for a mix of boys and girls, if possible.
- Add information to existing school communications for families or discuss the possibility of a Wellness Newsletter with your principal that could be distributed at different times during the year. This is a great vehicle for promoting not only school programs but also neighborhood and citywide fitness opportunities. For newsletter ideas, subscribe to [School Wellness Weekly](#).

HOW SHOULD TEACHERS TALK ABOUT BMI?

Body mass index (BMI) results are often the most challenging part of NYC FITNESSGRAM reports for students and families. Although there are other medical measures for assessing the proportion of total fat mass and fat-free mass in a child's body, BMI remains the most appropriate calculation for most, but

not all, children. It is a tool developed by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

BMI does not take into account muscle mass and some children with high levels of muscle mass may receive a score indicating that they are “overweight.” Because of this, we recommend that parents/caregivers speak to their child’s health care provider if they have any questions or concerns about the information on the report.

The NYC FITNESSGRAM report is not a diagnostic tool. It is meant to help educate students and families about measures of health-related fitness and suggest steps for creating and maintaining good health, including a discussion with the child’s pediatrician.

Here is some information that may be helpful when speaking with family members about how to begin or sustain ongoing conversations about improving student health and fitness. Note that these conversations require active listening and sensitivity on everyone’s part:

- We live in a culture fascinated by images of “perfect bodies” which are often not necessarily healthy bodies. Teachers and families want the best for their children. A positive self-image is something that can be supported both at home and at school. Be open to parent perspectives and work with them to define, expand, or amend the personal fitness goals of each student.
- Is BMI the perfect tool? No. A look at [epidemiological data](#), however, clearly shows the need for action on a massive scale to support and improve student health. Your efforts with your students and families to reinforce healthy habits at home will hopefully produce improved outcomes for all children.
- “Truth” can be in the eye of the beholder. While you may see a student as clearly overweight, the family might look at that child differently. Encourage parents/caregivers to take NYC FITNESSGRAM reports to their health care provider and have a conversation about the reported results. The Journal of Pediatrics January 2014 [article](#) again confirmed that “half of parents underestimated their children’s overweight/obese status and a significant minority underestimated children’s normal weight. Pediatricians are well positioned to make efforts to remedy parental underestimates and promote adoption of healthy habits.”