A Mentor’s Guide to Encouraging Healthy, Active Lifestyles Among Youth
With a focus on Connecticut's youth, The Governor's Prevention Partnership is a statewide public-private alliance, building a strong, healthy future workforce through leadership in mentoring and prevention of violence, underage drinking, alcohol and drug abuse. One of the major initiatives of The Governor's Prevention Partnership is the Connecticut Mentoring Partnership, which aims to increase, strengthen and support mentoring programs throughout the state, increase the number of mentoring relationships and build a strong base of leaders and stakeholders committed to mentoring.

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**DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF THE HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS TOOLKIT IS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE ANTHEM BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD FOUNDATION.**

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IMPORTANT NOTES

This toolkit is designed for mentors, instead of mentees. Mentors should refrain from showing the contents to mentees, and from mentioning the toolkit as a source for conversations and activities with their mentees. For example, the introductory section is meant to enhance the mentor’s understanding of healthy eating and physical activity, not to serve as a “lecture” for mentees. Likewise, the listing of Web resources is for the mentor, not the mentee, to browse through. Finally, keep in mind that mentors should review the toolkit; assess aspects of its content for appropriateness with their particular mentees; and use its tips, advice and resources sparingly as “teachable moments” unfold naturally in the course of their mentoring relationships.

The toolkit’s strategies work best with middle-school age youth participating in non-site-based mentoring programs where matches have the freedom to choose the content and location of activities. The toolkit may also be appropriate for use with high school age youth; however, keep in mind that healthy eating and physical activity habits are more likely to be already established at this age.

In addition, mentors seeking to implement the toolkit should ensure the following:

- Mentoring relationship (match) has existed for at least six months;
- He/she has good rapport and a positive emotional connection with the mentee;
- He/she is comfortable with the topic addressed by the toolkit and believes the mentee will also be comfortable with it;
- He/she has realistic expectations for the mentee regarding possible changes in attitudes and behaviors;
- He/she understands his/her role (i.e., friend rather than parent, therapist, etc.) and is committed to maintaining appropriate boundaries; and
- He/she understands the situations in which he/she needs to seek help from the mentoring program coordinator.

If you have questions about this toolkit or its use, please contact your mentoring program coordinator or The Governor’s Prevention Partnership (Connecticut Mentoring Partnership) at (860) 523-8042.
Dear Mentor:

Thank you for using Healthy Conversations: A Mentor’s Guide to Encouraging Healthy, Active Lifestyles Among Youth. The toolkit was designed especially for mentors like you, who want to encourage their mentees to make positive choices but who also know it’s important to maintain appropriate boundaries in the mentoring relationship.

We hope this toolkit helps you and your mentee feel comfortable and empowered when it comes to discussing the topic of healthy eating and physical activity. Your words, the example you set, and the support you provide will go a long way in helping him or her remain on the right path.

The mission of The Governor’s Prevention Partnership and The Connecticut Mentoring Partnership is to keep youth safe, successful and drug-free. We applaud your willingness to stand with us as we help protect our state’s most precious resource!

Sincerely,

Jill K. Spineti
President and CEO
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Early adolescence is a time of crucial turning points in terms of health behaviors. Research has shown that diet and exercise habits formed at this stage of life tend to last through adulthood.

There is growing national concern over adult health problems associated with being overweight or obese. Unfortunately, according to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, by the time they reach high school almost 26% of Connecticut high school students are either overweight (14.7%) or obese (11.2%). Even children themselves are concerned. In a poll conducted by KidsHealth, a Nemours Foundation health information website, 52% of kids said that too many kids are overweight. One study in 2005 found that as a result of obesity, children today could be the first generation of the modern era to live shorter lives than their parents.

This Healthy Conversations toolkit is designed to provide mentors, mentoring programs, and parents with information, activities, conversation starters and resources to promote healthy, active lifestyles among middle-school aged children. A companion Healthy Conversations toolkit, “A Mentor’s Guide to Preventing Youth Tobacco Use,” has been developed to focus on prevention of youth tobacco use.

Our goals for mentors using this toolkit are to:

- Better understand the health consequences of obesity and lack of physical activity;
- Gain skills and increase comfort level in talking about healthy eating and an active lifestyle with mentees (whether they or the mentee brings up the topic);
- Gain skills and increase comfort level in appropriately incorporating educational activities into the mentoring relationship; and
- Better understand how to serve as a non-judgmental role model for healthy behaviors.

As a mentor, you can have a significant influence on your mentee’s health-related attitudes, beliefs and actions. We hope this toolkit will inspire and support you to have “healthy conversations” with your mentee. Your mentoring program coordinator has also received a toolkit and is ready to help you with any additional information or support you may need.
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILDHOOD WEIGHT PROBLEMS

How serious of a problem is it?

Childhood (and adult) weight problems are defined in terms of the Body Mass Index (BMI), which is a measure of body fat based on height and weight.

FOR ADULTS

- A BMI of 18.5-24.9 is considered normal.
- A BMI of 25-29.9 indicates the person is “overweight.”
- A BMI over 30 indicates the person is “obese.”

FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

BMI is age- and sex-specific and is often referred to as BMI-for-age. The BMI number is plotted on the Centers for Disease Control BMI-for-age growth charts (for either girls or boys) to obtain a percentile ranking. The percentile indicates the relative position of the child’s BMI number among children of the same sex and age.

- A 5th percentile to less than the 85th percentile is considered healthy.
- A 85th to less than the 95th percentile is considered overweight.
- Equal to or greater than the 95th percent is considered obese.
According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health:

- 26% of Connecticut high school students are either overweight (14.7%) or obese (11.2%).
- Boys are more likely to be overweight or obese than girls.
- Hispanic and Black youth are more likely to be overweight or obese than Caucasian youth.
- The rate of childhood weight problems has doubled in the last 30 years.
- Adolescents who are overweight have an estimated 80% chance of being obese as adults.
- Children and adolescents who are overweight face significant health risks:
  - Type 2 diabetes, typically not seen until adulthood, has increased from 4% of child diabetes diagnoses 10 years ago to 45% today.
  - 60% of overweight children have at least one risk factor for heart disease including hypertension or high cholesterol level.
  - There is a higher risk of asthma, especially in obese boys.
  - Early onset of puberty is more likely.
- Children and adolescents who are overweight also face significant psychological problems:
  - They are more likely to be bullied by other children and to be bullies themselves.
  - They rate their quality of life as low as young cancer patients receiving chemotherapy do.
  - They are more likely to suffer from poor body image and self-concept.
  - They are more likely to be depressed.
  - They are more likely to become socially isolated.
  - They are at greater risk for eating disorders.

What causes childhood weight problems?

At the most basic level, childhood weight problems are caused by poor food choices and lack of physical activity. These two major contributing factors involve a complex interplay of social, cultural, family, biological/genetic and behavioral factors. More specifically, these include:

**DIETARY CHOICES**

Unhealthy food choices, including diets higher in calories from fats and sugars and lower in fruits and vegetables, are more likely to lead to weight problems.

- Only 20% of Connecticut children eat the recommended 5 or more daily servings of fruits and vegetables.
- More than 60% of American youth eat too many fatty foods.
- Soda consumption increased dramatically in the early to mid-1990s. 32% of adolescent girls and 52% of adolescent boys consume three or more eight-ounce servings of soda per day. Simultaneously, milk consumption declined by more than 30%.
- Food portion sizes have increased significantly in the last 30 years. For example, average portion sizes increased from 1.0 oz. to 1.6 oz. for salty snacks and from 12.2 oz. to 19.9 oz. for soft drinks.
EATING HABITS
American eating habits have changed significantly in the last 30 years in terms of what is consumed, portion size, influence of advertising on food and beverage choices and eating associated with sedentary activities, such as watching television.

- Children are getting more of their food away from home. Eating at fast-food restaurants has become prevalent among young people, with 75% of 7 to 12th-graders consuming fast food in a given week.
- Family meals have often been replaced by fast-food, prepared meals that may be high in fats; snacking continuously throughout the day has also become common.
- Cookies, chips, sweets, sugar-sweetened drinks and other high-calorie snack foods are readily available in many homes for children to fill up on.
- Television-related snacking can increase daily caloric intake and is often influenced by advertisements for unhealthy snacks and sugar-sweetened drinks.
- School lunch menus, currently undergoing a transformation to offer more healthy choices, often contain high-fat and high-sugar options.

LACK OF EXERCISE
Today’s young people are considered the most inactive generation in history, according to the American Obesity Association. Watching television, using the computer, and playing video games occupy a large percentage of children’s leisure time, decreasing their levels of physical activity. It is estimated that children in the United States spend 25% of their waking hours watching television. Statistically, children who watch the most hours of television have the highest incidence of obesity. This occurs not only because little energy is expended while viewing television, but also because of the high-calorie snacks that tend to be consumed.

- Almost 10% of Connecticut youth do not participate in any moderate or vigorous physical activity during an average week. The rates of inactivity are highest among Hispanic students (16%) and black students (13%).
- Connecticut secondary schools do not typically offer daily physical education classes.
- 33% of Connecticut’s high school students watch television for three or more hours on the average school day. The rate among black students is 59%.
**What about Genetics?**

Family history plays a significant part in whether children will develop a serious weight problem. Approximately 25-40 percent of children inherit the tendency to become overweight. If children come from a family of overweight people, and high-calorie food is also readily available, they are even more likely to become overweight.

**What about Socio-economic and Cultural Factors?**

Researchers from the University of Michigan found that low-income neighborhoods have a higher number of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores with unhealthy food choices, and lack supermarkets offering healthier food options. Studies show that minority students living in these neighborhoods are exposed to more television advertisements for junk food. Further, schools in low-income neighborhoods do not offer as many healthy food choices and have fewer extracurricular sports activities available.

**What about Marketing and Advertising?**

According to the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](https://www.hhs.gov), a growing body of research suggests a link between exposure to food advertising and the increasing rates of obesity among youth. In the 1970s and 1980s a number of experimental studies were conducted that demonstrated young children (under age eight) were much more likely than older children to believe that television advertisements were telling the truth; and that exposure to television advertisements influenced their food preferences which increased requests to parents for the high-sugar foods they saw advertised.

- Annual sales of foods and beverages to young consumers exceeded $27 billion in 2002.
- Food and beverage advertisers collectively spend $10 to $12 billion annually to reach children and youth. More than $1 billion is spent on media advertising to children (primarily on television); more than $4.5 billion is spent on youth-targeted public relations; and $3 billion is spent on packaging designed for children.
- Fast-food outlets spend $3 billion in television ads targeted to children.
ENTRY POINTS FOR DISCUSSING HEALTHY, ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

How to get the conversation started

Now that you’re up to speed on the realities of youth weight problems, the next step is planning some ways in which you might be able to discuss this sensitive subject with your mentee. Conversations like these can be challenging—you want to encourage positive choices, but you don’t want to be pushy or offend your mentee. You also don’t want to bring up a topic like eating habits or physical lifestyle seemingly “out of thin air.” The good news is that there are a few easy, comfortable ways to start a discussion with your mentee about nutrition and exercise —“Smart Responses” and “cracking the door.”

SMART RESPONSES

These are responses you prepare and keep handy in case the mentee spontaneously mentions the topic of food choices, nutrition, concern about his/her own or others’ body weight, exercise, or losing weight.

A Smart Response does the following:

- Avoids blaming or judging the mentee.
- Avoids harsh overreaction or “scare tactics.”
- Maintains appropriate boundaries (the mentor is not a parent, physician, therapist or peer).
- Invites the mentee to share his/her perspective on the issue.
- Opens discussion of options and choices.
- Encourages a problem-solving alliance between mentor and mentee.
- Offers information and only if wanted.
Here are some examples:

The mentee says:
"The other kids make fun of me in gym class because of my weight."

IN CASES OF TEASING AND BULLYING, THE FOLLOWING RESPONSE SHOULD ALWAYS BE MADE:

“It's important that you tell an adult about that. Would you like some help in telling a parent/guardian, teacher or another adult?”

Other possible Smart Responses:

- That sounds like a tough situation.
- I’m sorry you were in a tough situation like that.
- I’m here to listen if you want to talk about that.
- I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me.
- It must be hard for you when other kids do that.
- Have you told your parent (caregiver) about that?
- How would you feel about telling your parent (caregiver) about that?
- Is there anyone you want me to talk to about this?
- [If appropriate] I feel like I should tell the program coordinator about this, just so he/she knows the challenge you're facing. Is that OK with you?
The mentee says:

“My doctor said I’m overweight and that I should go on a diet and start exercising.”

Possible Smart Responses:

- How do you feel about that?
- What did you think when the doctor said that?
- Now you’re faced with some choices.
- Would you like to hear my advice about that?
- Is there anyone besides me you’d like to talk to about this?
- Is there anyone you want me to talk to about this?
- That’s a situation that I’m also facing right now [or that I have faced]. Would you like to hear about my situation?
- That was a situation I also faced when I was your age. Can I tell you about what I did?
- What have you learned about diet and exercise?
- Would you like to hear what I’ve learned about diet and exercise?
- Should we talk about this again sometime?

Responses to Avoid:

- I can’t believe the doctor said that to you!
- Just tell the doctor you’re not overweight.
- Don’t you know that being overweight can kill you?
- I’m going to tell [program coordinator] or [parent/caretaker].
- You have to tell your parent(s)/caretaker.
- Well, you do need to lose a few pounds.
- You should find a new doctor.

Think about it…what would your “smart response” be if your mentee made the following statement?

- I’ve tried to diet and exercise regularly, but I gave up.
- I know I’m big, but I don’t know how to lose weight and get in shape.
- I love fast food, desserts and soda.
- I wish I could lose weight.
- Most of my friends are athletes.
- Being fat is embarrassing.
- Other kids would like me if I wasn’t so fat.
- Everyone in my family is overweight and nobody exercises.
- You’re overweight, too. Do you exercise?
CRACKING THE DOOR

If the mentee does not spontaneously mention weight problems AND ONLY IF the mentor has developed sufficient rapport and trust with the mentee, mentors may want to offer a gentle nudge. Think of this as “opening the door a crack” for the mentee to talk about it if he/she chooses.

Remember: If you crack the door and the mentee chooses not to talk, don’t push it. Consider trying again another day, or simply acknowledge that the topic is not a good fit for your mentee.

There are two ways to comfortably and naturally (crack the door) to discussing obesity:

1. Commenting on the surrounding environment in which you find yourselves during your meeting OR
2. Steering the “small talk” that you have at the beginning of your meeting.

Example of commenting on surrounding environment:

A mentor and mentee are sharing reading materials together, and the mentor brings in a magazine that happens to contain an ad for a fast-food restaurant. The mentor may say, “I wish I could have that kind of food, but I’m trying to eat healthier.” Or, the mentor is walking through a neighborhood with a mentee and they happen to walk by a store that advertises a guaranteed weight loss program in the window. The mentor may say, “What do you think kids your age walking by this store might think about that ad in the window?”

Example of steering “small talk”:

While a mentor and mentee are having a “How have you been since our last meeting?” check-in, the mentor asks about how school is going and whether he/she might want to try out for a sports team. The mentor then mentions recently learning about a membership plan at the new swim club in town. Or, the mentor mentions having had a recent conversation with a spouse/friend/family member who’s trying to lose weight.

The mentee’s response in these situations will indicate whether he/she is willing to continue the conversation. If he/she seems receptive, you can proceed with the activities and conversations described in the next section.
GENERAL GUIDELINES

REMEMBER:

• Always contact your program coordinator if you have concerns about your mentee and are unsure of what to say/do.

• Maintain confidentiality with your mentee when possible in order to preserve trust. However:
  - Make sure you know in advance whether your mentoring program’s policies require you to disclose certain types of information to the coordinator and if the coordinator is then obligated to report it to parents and/or state authorities.
  - If you must disclose, let your mentee know beforehand and explain why you’re obligated to do this.
  - It may be appropriate to encourage the mentee to tell his/her parent/guardian about life challenges he/she’s facing. Mentors should avoid talking directly to a mentee’s parent/guardian unless the mentor is absolutely sure he/she has the mentee’s and the program coordinator’s permission to do this.

• The activities listed later in this guide are intended as follow-ups ONLY for mentees who have expressed a willingness to talk about the issue. (See earlier “Entry Points” section on page 10.)

• Activities are not intended to be “lessons.” If you stop feeling like a mentor and start feeling like a classroom teacher, you’re probably coming on too strong. Keep it short, simple and fun. Let your mentee’s interests be your guide in choosing how to use Healthy Conversations. Suggest activities that you think your mentee will enjoy.

• Pay attention to the signals your mentee may be giving. If he/she expresses boredom or exhibits discomfort with any activity or related conversation, switch gears and change the subject.

• Have “smart responses” prepared in case the activity or resulting conversation prompts the mentee to disclose having weight and diet issues, express concerns about others’ weight problems, or ask questions about diet and exercise.

• Don’t devote entire or consecutive mentoring sessions/meetings to the topic of healthy eating and physical activity. Approaching the topic in a heavy-handed manner could turn the mentee off. A 15-minute discussion every so often is sufficient. Avoid setting a predictable pattern of bringing up the topic (e.g., every other meeting). Instead, wait for the right moment.

• Consider the neighborhood context of your mentee when considering possible physical activities that you and he/she might choose. Open space, athletic fields, basketball courts, bike and walking trails and other opportunities may not be available in some urban neighborhoods. Keep in mind also that the mentee’s parent/guardian may not feel safe sending his/her child outdoors to play.

• Pay attention to the signals your mentee may be giving. If he/she expresses boredom, annoyance or discomfort with any activity or related conversation, take the hint. Consider trying again another day or simply acknowledge that the topic is not a good fit for your mentee.
• Have Smart Responses prepared in case the activity or resulting conversation prompts the mentee to disclose any concerns with their weight, or ask questions about exercise.

• Conversations about nutrition and exercise will be more comfortable and effective if you model and help your mentee learn healthy coping mechanisms. You can encourage your mentee to cope in healthy ways by:
  - Pinpointing the source of stress;
  - Setting realistic goals and using time management skills;
  - Taking care of physical health;
  - Practicing physical relaxation techniques;
  - Keeping a journal to express emotions;
  - Identifying healthy ways of releasing frustrations;
  - Using positive self-talk to remind him/herself about what’s going well in life;
  - Learning how to get along with others better;
  - Using humor; and
  - Treating mistakes as learning experiences.

DO’S AND DON’TS

**As a mentor you are a friend and guide.** You are not ultimately responsible for changing your mentee’s lifestyle or eating habits. What you can do is help guide him or her to healthy lifestyle choices.

• Be a good role model for healthy behaviors when you are with your mentee.
• Try some of the activities in the Healthy Conversations toolkit with your mentee.
• Incorporate some physical activities into the time you spend with your mentee.
• Consider your mentee’s unique cultural and environmental context.
• Be sensitive to the fact that your mentee may be tired of having adults “lecturing” him/her about eating habits and exercise.

**Be honest with your mentee.** Chances are you have not had a totally healthy lifestyle yourself; very few people have. This may be an opportunity for you to incorporate some changes in your own lifestyle and to talk to your mentee about what you are trying to change and why.

• If you are incorporating health eating and exercise into your lifestyle, tell your mentee how hard it is to maintain. Talk to your mentee about how your eating habits and exercise have affected you, or are affecting your health.
Respect your mentee’s culture and family values and practices. Different cultures and ethnic groups have differing values regarding weight, the role of food, the types of food eaten and the role of physical activity in their lives.

- Focus on the positive; talk about healthy food and exercise habits in each culture.
- Avoid passing judgment or criticizing family members, family practices, food choices, or lifestyle choices.
- Use holidays as a way of learning more about your mentee’s cultural/family food traditions.
- Together, investigate and discuss sports and other physical activities enjoyed within your mentee’s culture/ethnic group.
- Be aware that socioeconomic status may also influence a person’s eating habits.

Build on your mentee’s interests. Let your mentee’s interests be your guide in choosing how to use Healthy Conversations. Girls will be interested in different things than boys. For example middle school age girls tend to be more preoccupied with body image and may be more concerned about dieting. Boys may be concerned with body image in terms of strength and muscles and most likely have an interest in sports. The "Resource Section" suggests web-based activities that will appeal to each.

Connect Healthy Conversations to what your mentee is learning in school.
Most middle school age students either have learned or are learning about things like the Food Pyramid, Body Mass Index, healthy nutrition and the importance of being physically active. Ask your mentee what he/she has been learning and what he/she thinks about it. What would he/she like to know more about? Use this as a basis for choosing possible activities from the toolkit.

Get help if you have any concerns or questions. You may be concerned because you don’t think you know enough to use Healthy Conversations. Or maybe you’re not sure how to use the program because your mentee is overweight or has family members with weight problems and you don’t want to offend them. Talk to the mentee’s family members, if appropriate, to seek their advice. For example, if you would like to do some physical activities with your mentee who is very overweight, you might be concerned about his/her ability to handle the activity. It might be necessary for the parent to consult the child’s health care provider to make sure the exercise is OK for him/her.

Reinforce any positive changes or choices your mentee makes and avoid criticizing poor choices. If you have done a Healthy Conversations activity and you notice a new behavior or attitude, point out that you are proud of your mentee for caring so much about his/her health. Always avoid criticism; for example, criticizing your mentee’s choice of french fries as a snack when you eat together. It is more productive to handle a situation like this by using it as an opportunity to talk about healthy vs. unhealthy foods.

Practice and reinforce tolerance and kindness. For example, if your mentee, or someone you overhear while with your mentee, is saying unkind things or making fun of someone because of his/her physical appearance or weight, use this as an opportunity to talk about physical appearance and how it can influence someone’s self esteem.
Don’t ask the mentee if he/she diets. Let him or her make that disclosure if he/she chooses, and have your “smart response” ready if this happens.

Don’t assume that you have no influence over your mentee’s decision to adopt a healthy lifestyle. A caring adult is a very important factor in a child’s decision to practice good nutrition and exercise habits. A mentor can encourage healthy eating and exercise simply by being a genuine and consistent presence in the mentee’s life.

Don’t assume your mentee knows about the dangers of poor nutrition and obesity. Even though most schools teach about the importance of good nutrition and regular exercise, too many kids still don’t really believe that they could become obese or experience the kinds of diseases they may learn about in health class. They convince themselves that heart disease and diabetes only happen to older adults.

Don’t make high-calorie food a “forbidden fruit.” Instead of saying something like “All sweets are bad for you,” try to focus on specifics about why certain foods and beverages can lead to health problems.

Don’t be judgmental if the mentee mentions his/her weight or unhealthy diet. Again, just have your “smart response” ready. Remember that you are not the mentee’s parent. Instead, express your own views and values about good nutrition and exercise and serve as a positive, supportive role model.

Don’t ask about the mentee’s family members, even if you know they are overweight. Have your “smart response” ready in case the mentee does bring up the topic of his/her family, but always let it be the mentee’s choice to do this. If your mentee talks about his/her family’s eating habits, just listen and help him or her better understand his/her own feelings about it. You can also ask whether the mentee would like to do anything differently in his/her own life. It is important to remain sensitive to the family’s culture, values/practices, and history during this process.

Don’t urge the mentee to “lecture” or try to change the minds of peers or family members who overeat and don’t exercise. Just as you should refrain from judging your mentee regarding his/her eating habits and physical activity, don’t take sides against the mentee’s parent/guardian. It is important to support parent/guardian(s) even if you don’t agree with their choices. Likewise, be very careful not to imply that you are criticizing your mentee’s friends; it will only cause him/her to tune out. Leave the door open, however, for your mentee to talk to you if he/she is worried about friends. If your mentee requests your help in talking with his/her parent/guardian or friends about their weight, identify information the mentee can share with others, if he/she requests your help.
CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

In addition to practicing possible Smart Responses, here are examples of some of the ways in which you might want to prepare before meeting with your mentee.

GETTING PREPARED

Preparing to Choose an Exercise

- Visit some of the Websites described in the “Resource Section” at the end of this guide and make sure they are accessible from whatever computer you’ll be using with your mentee. Become familiar with what each site has to offer. Make a list of the ones you intend to use with your mentee. If possible, bookmark these sites on the computer you will be using.

Preparing to Go for a Walk With Your Mentee

- Map out where you could walk with your mentee.
  - If you mentor in a site-based program, check out the neighborhood or site grounds to determine a good walking route.
  - If you mentor in a community-based program, check out local parks through your town’s recreation department or the state Department of Environmental Protection website. See the “Resource Section” for more information.

- Consider purchasing a pedometer for you and your mentee (these cost about $5 at discount store) to measure how many steps you take in the walk.
Preparing to Plan Meals for a Day With Your Mentee

• Review the following materials in your toolkit:
  - Be Choosy
  - We Can! GO, SLOW and WHOA Foods
  - My Pyramid
  - 5-3-1 Weekly Tracker
  - Feed Me

• If you are mentoring a boy whom you suspect will not be interested in this activity, you could first review and/or print out and discuss the KidsHealth web pages: The New York Giants, Eating for Performance and The Pittsburgh Stealers: Eating Right at Training Camp.

  These pages discuss how athletes need good nutrition and feature interviews with team members about their favorite healthy foods. Frame the activity in terms of planning a day of healthy meals for your mentee's favorite athlete.

• Similarly, an introductory activity for girls would be the KidsHealth web pages The Rockettes, Eating Healthy Before the Show and/or the page on the U.S. Women's Soccer Team.

Preparing to Shop for Healthy Foods With Your Mentee

• Check out the following activities in preparing to shop for healthy foods with your mentee:
  - Be Choosy
  - My Pyramid

• Choose a local grocery store to visit and map your driving route.
• Develop an evening meal of food packaged in cans or boxes.
• Develop an evening meal of fresh food items.
• Find a website with information on how to estimate the calorie and fat content of fresh foods.
EARLY CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

After you have established a rapport with your mentee, consider these conversation starters after you’ve successfully “cracked the door” to discussing healthy eating and physical activity with your mentee. These conversations and activities don’t address personal health/behavior and therefore may be more comfortable for the mentee.

Go for a Walk With Your Mentee

CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

• Explain how to use the pedometer to your mentee and talk about how important physical activity is to health and well-being. Some points to include:
  - Walking is an important weight control strategy;
  - Walking is also good for stress reduction and makes you feel good about yourself;
  - Walking is something easy to fit into each day.

• Talk with your mentee about how much he/she walks every day. Ask if he/she would like to have a “walking contest” with you to see how many steps each of you can take in the next week using your pedometers to keep track of it. If you do not have pedometers, you could each keep track of how many minutes each of you walks every day. If the mentee is not interested, ask him/her to suggest another “physical activity” contest you could have with each other.

• At your next meeting, talk about how much walking/exercise each of you did the last week and how it made you feel. If you walk again this week, take your pulse at the end of the walk and discuss how walking helps your heart.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

• Talk to your mentoring program coordinator about the possibility of starting a “walking club” where mentors and mentees could plan and go on hikes or walks in area parks or walking trails.

• If feasible, consider taking your mentee on a bike ride. See the “Resource Section” for more information on resources related to biking.

• Don’t forget to refer to the “Resource Section” of this guide for additional websites that feature other activities related to physical activity, including activities that help mentees analyze why they do or do not want to exercise and overcome barriers to increasing physical activity.

PROBLEM SOLVING

• If your mentee is unable or unwilling to engage in a walking activity with you due to a weight problem or other physical limitation, talk your mentoring program coordinator to discuss other possible activities.

• If your mentee is physically able, but reluctant to do this activity, you can try the “Choosing to Exercise” (Refer to page 24) activity prior to suggesting a walk together.
Talking While Doing Physical Activities Together

Depending on the type of mentoring program you volunteer in, there may be opportunities for you and your mentee to engage in physical activities together. For example, in a school-based or after-school program the gym or playground may be available. In a community-based program, you have access to all the recreational facilities of your community such as parks, bike or walking trails and pools. These shared physical activities are an opportunity for a “healthy conversation.”

CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

- The next time you and your mentee are doing a physical activity together you can make positive comments about it such as:
  - How good it feels to exercise and how much you enjoy being active;
  - How good exercise is for your body;
  - How exercise helps you deal with stress or helps you get over being angry about something;
  - How important exercise is to you in helping you control your weight.

- After you have finished doing a physical activity with your mentee ask him/her how he/she feels and why he/she enjoyed (or did not enjoy) the activity. Ask if there are other physical activities he/she enjoys and why.

- Ask your mentee if he/she knows why exercise is good for you. Some things to talk about include how exercise helps your body be healthy by:
  - Strengthening your muscles, heart (which is a muscle) and lungs;
  - Helping you be flexible and have good balance (important if you are playing sports).

- Show your mentee how to take his/her pulse to measure how his/her heart rate is changing with exercise and talk about why it is good for your heart to work harder.

- If your mentee seems interested in managing his/her weight, talk about the relationship of calories and weight gain to exercise. For example,
  - Workouts that burn about 7 calories per minute include aerobics, basketball, baseball, cycling (moderate), dancing (active), football, racquetball, skiing, swimming, tennis (singles) and walking (brisk).
  - Workouts that burn about 10 calories per minute include basketball (competitive), cycling (fast), dancing (strenuous), football (competitive), jogging, kick-boxing, running, skiing (cross country), skipping (with rope), swimming (vigorous), walking (vigorous) and weight training (heavy).

  There are numerous online calorie calculators that you can find through a Google search as well as a calorie/exercise chart at NutriStrategy.

- Ask your mentee if there are other physical activities he/she would like to do with you and make a plan for how you might begin to do these things.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- Not every mentee will want to do physical activities during a mentoring session. If you would like to encourage your mentee in this direction, review the “Choosing to Exercise” sections of this guide, starting on page 24.

- Consult your mentoring coordinator regarding any concerns or questions you may about your mentee’s ability to engage in physical exercise.
Talking While Having a Meal or Snack Together

One of the things mentors often do with their mentees is to have a meal or snack together. If you are in a school-based program, you may meet with your mentee during his/her lunch hour. In an after-school program a snack may be a planned part of the program. If you are in a community-based program you may occasionally take your mentee out for a meal to a fast-food restaurant or pizza place, or even make a meal together in your home. These are opportunities for you to have a “healthy conversation” about a wide variety of issues including healthy vs. unhealthy food choices, how people develop eating habits and favorite food choices, and how food can help people cope with stress.

CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

- **Favorite Foods:** The next time you and your mentee are eating together, ask him/her what he/she likes best in the meal or snack you are having. Ask why he/she likes it. This can lead into a conversation about favorite foods and foods the mentee dislikes. Suggest making a list of what his/her and your favorite and least-favorite foods are. Once you have done this you can go down the list and talk about which choices are the healthiest. Avoid criticizing unhealthy favorites, or labeling them as “junk food.”

- **Healthy vs. Unhealthy Food Choices:** Refer to the “We Can! GO, SLOW and WHOA Foods” or the Feed Me Activity. Bring the list to your next mentoring session, and if your mentee is interested, put your most and least favorite food choices into each of the categories. Once you have categorized your food choices, talk about how your body might feel about your choices. For example, your taste buds might really like an ice cream sundae, while your heart is saying, “No, no, no!”

- **Fast Food Choices:** The next time you are in a fast-food restaurant with your mentee, ask the food server if you can have a nutrition list for the menu items. Some fast-food chains put this information on their place mats. As you are eating, look at the list and rate how healthy your own food choices were (avoid criticizing the mentee’s food choices).

- **Food and Stress:** You may encounter a situation where either you or your mentee is stressed due to time pressures, school, work or other personal issues. You may find that you and your mentee are hungrier than usual and are gulping down food. Such a situation is the perfect opportunity to talk about how stress affects appetite and food choices.
  - Bring up the subject of you or your mentee’s stress. Ask if he/she is feeling more stressed than usual today or share that you are feeling stressed. Ask if he/she has ever noticed how stress makes you feel hungrier or crave certain foods. If so, ask what foods he/she craves when stressed. You may need to give examples of stress-induced eating such as coming home after a hard day at school, losing a sports game, having someone tease you, etc.
  - Talk about how foods like salty snacks, chocolate and other sweets can be particularly appealing when you are stressed. This is a good opportunity to talk about balance; for example, you may talk about how you had two chocolate candy bars after a bad day at the office but tried to eat something healthier at dinner. Ask your mentee how he/she might balance stress eating or make healthier choices in that kind of situation.

**THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND**

- Try to avoid becoming preachy in any of these conversations. Instead, encourage the mentee to begin to think more consciously about the food he/she eats.

- Don’t act like the “food police.” Your goal is not to dictate what your mentee eats, but to set a good example regarding healthy vs. unhealthy food choices. Be prepared in the event that your mentee asks about your food choices.
Talking About Media Messages and Images

Young people are bombarded with media messages about food, nutrition and weight, including advertising, product placements in television shows and movies, media images of popular musicians and actors, magazine photos, etc. For the most part these messages tend toward unhealthy and unrealistic portrayals of food, nutrition and weight. They make high-fat, low-nutrition foods very tempting through repetitive advertising messages, subliminal messaging that links eating with “fun” and “excitement,” and use of attractive role models to promote products. Further, the media portrays body sizes and shapes that are unrealistic and have little to do with being healthy or having healthy eating habits.

Up to about age 11 or 12, children tend to accept advertising messages at face value. By this age they have already formed dietary preferences for fatty, salty and sugary foods; have adopted, without questioning, brand preferences; and have accepted the link between entertainment characters and fast-food meals and other low-nutrition foods. (After Santa Claus, the next most-recognized media icon is Ronald McDonald.) As a mentor, you can help children think more critically about these choices by helping them learn about and analyze media messaging and images.

CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

There are many opportunities for a “healthy conversation” with your mentee related to media influences. You may hear or see food advertisements on television or radio, on billboards, in store windows, or in grocery stores. You may be watching a television program or movie that features people eating or talking about food. You may be looking at magazines or videos that portray attractive, thin models, actors or musicians.

- Your mentee may at some point refer to a favorite advertisement, highly advertised food, favorite media figure or other advertising/media influence. When these opportunities occur, ask your mentee what appeals to him/her about what he/she sees or hears. Encourage him/her to talk about it, asking questions such as:
  - Why did someone create this ad or image? Who are they trying to influence?
  - What do you think they are trying to tell you or make you think?
  - What feelings do they want you to have as you look at it?
  - How do they get their message across?
  - What methods do they use to get your attention and make you look at the ad or image?
  - Is this message or image “telling the whole truth”? Do real people look like this?
  - Are the ads showing healthy foods as often as they show unhealthy ones?
  - What information seems to be missing?

- If your mentee seems interested in this type of conversation, you can ask him/her to think about and notice other ads or images. You may use some of your mentoring sessions to look at magazines together to identify and discuss ads related to healthy lifestyles.

- Another follow-up activity could be for you and your mentee to create your own ads to tell the real truth about healthy eating or lifestyles.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- Your mentee may have become so accustomed to the ads and images you are seeing together that he/she may have difficulty “stepping back” to look at them objectively. Be patient and continue to revisit the topic as opportunities present themselves.
Mentor-Initiated Activity: Choosing to Exercise

CONVERSATION

If you use the Teen Beat website, have your mentee complete the interactive questionnaires and discuss his/her responses. Talk about what physical activities you enjoy, how you got interested in them and why you continue to do them. In the final step, ask whether your mentee would like your help in developing an exercise plan.

If you use the Body and Mind website, have your mentee click on and complete the “Go for Activities You Like to Do” section at the bottom of the page. Discuss his/her responses as he/she completes the Motion Commotion questionnaire. As the mentee reviews the interactive response and list of possible activities he/she might enjoy, discuss whether any of the activities would be feasible. If he/she is responsive, help him/her to review the Activity Cards section and complete the Activities Calendar. In subsequent mentoring sessions, talk about the calendar and if your mentee is willing, begin to incorporate some of the activities into your mentoring sessions.

Have a conversation about exercise.

- Ask your mentee what physical activities he/she enjoys. Be prepared to have him/her experience some difficulty in identifying these. Some things you might suggest include walking, running, sports activities such as basketball or skateboarding, dancing, or riding a bike. Asking him/her to describe what he/she does in a typical day/week may help in identifying physical activities.

- Talk about what physical activities you enjoy. You may decide to share with your mentee why you enjoy doing these activities, for example:
  - It makes you feel more relaxed and energetic;
  - You like competition or feeling challenged;
  - You like team sports because you make friends; or
  - You like solitary sports (such as biking or running alone) because it gives you a chance to think.

- Suggest that your mentee could “interview” his/her family members and friends about why they exercise, using the “Why Do People Exercise” worksheet. If he/she does this, continue the discussion at the next mentoring session.

- Ask your mentee why he/she thinks people do not like to exercise. Reasons might include:
  - It takes too much effort.
  - It is uncomfortable because the person is out of shape or overweight.
  - The person does not have the “equipment” such as a bike or sports equipment.
  - The person doesn’t have enough time.
• You may play a problem-solving game with your mentee. For each reason not to exercise, take turns coming up with solutions that would help the person get more exercise. Don’t be too quick to suggest things if your mentee seems stuck for ideas. Encourage him/her to just say the first thing that comes into his/her mind. Make it fun – silly ideas are OK.

• Ask your mentee if he/she would like to exercise more and why.
  - If no, ask whether he/she would like your help problem-solving to find exercise opportunities he/she would enjoy.
  - If yes, help him/her identify things he/she would like to do. If your mentee is interested, go over the “Move It” worksheet together to talk about interesting ideas for getting more physical activity. Make a plan to include at least one or two new physical activities each week, using the “We Can! Fit in Daily Physical Activity” worksheet.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

• Begin to include, as feasible, some of the physical activities your mentee enjoys or would like to try in subsequent mentoring sessions. This might be as simple as having your mentee teach you the latest dance style or going for a walk together, or as complex as planning and taking a day-long hike or bike trip together.
• Do the “Go For a Walk” Activity, on page 18.
• Refer to the “Resource Section” for further web-based information and activities.

PROBLEM SOLVING

• If your mentee is overweight or otherwise would find it difficult to engage in any physical activity, try to identify simple activities he/she could do during your mentoring sessions such as walking more or simple stretches to promote relaxation.
• If your mentee prefers to spend most of his/her out-of-school time watching television, on the computer or playing video games, talk about simple exercises he/she could do at the same time such as walking in place, leg or arm lifts, stretches, etc. If your mentoring sessions include some of these more passive activities, talk with your mentee about how you can begin to include more physical activities, building on his/her interests. Also encourage your mentee to set goals to reduce this “inactive” time and replace it with some enjoyable physical activities.
ADVANCED CONVERSATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Use these ONLY after you have successfully “cracked the door” with your mentee regarding healthy eating habits and physical activity AND after you’ve established a comfort level by having a few prior conversations about healthy eating and physical activity.

Talking About Food Customs, Including Foods You and Your Family Eat During the Holiday Season

Sharing family holiday and holiday eating customs is a great way to get to know your mentee better, to gain a greater appreciation of his/her culture and to talk about eating habits. It is particularly important to not be judgmental or critical of the food customs of your mentee’s family and culture.

CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

• The next time there is a major American holiday or holiday in your mentee’s culture, tell your mentee you would like to better understand how his/her family/culture celebrates this holiday. Ask him/her to tell you what the holiday is about and how his/her family celebrates it, for example what his/her family likes to do on the holiday.

• Ask if food is an important part of the holiday. Share your own experiences such as how your family gets together for a big meal on Thanksgiving or your neighborhood has a Fourth of July picnic. Ask your mentee to talk about the foods his/her family prepares for the holiday and why these foods are special. Are there long-standing family food traditions, such as always preparing certain foods for the holiday?

• Share your family traditions and talk about how often food is the centerpiece of family/cultural/religious celebrations. Ask your mentee why he/she thinks this is the case.

• You might also suggest that your mentee “interview” his/her family members on this topic and discuss their responses at a future mentoring session.

• Ask your mentee what has been learned about culture and family from these holiday celebrations.

• If possible and appropriate, invite your mentee to a holiday meal with your family. Talk about the food that is served, the family traditions behind it, how what you eat today is similar or different from what people in earlier generations ate, etc. This may be an opportunity to talk about how people today have much more food to eat than their ancestors did, which could lead to weight gain. If you go in this direction, the conversation should be framed in terms of your family, not the mentee’s family.

• If the mentee does observe that certain foods associated with the holiday under discussion may be unhealthy, ask if there are other foods that could be added to or substituted for these foods to make a healthier holiday meal. You can also talk about how food preparation methods (e.g., frying vs. roasting) influence how healthy the food is.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

This activity will work best if you have already had prior conversations about healthy food choices so that the focus can just be on sharing and not on analyzing food choices. If your mentee has absorbed the concept of healthy vs. unhealthy foods, he/she will be able to draw his/her own conclusions at a time that is appropriate for him/her.
Talking About Your Mentee’s Interest in Losing (or Gaining) Weight

NOTE: This conversation should occur ONLY if the mentee brings up the topic.

Middle school aged children become much more aware of their bodies and how they look in relationship to their peers, as well as in comparison to images in the popular media. Some level of dissatisfaction with their appearance may be normal. As a mentor you can reinforce positive feelings about their image as well as help them understand that image is not all that matters about a person.

CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

• Ask your mentee why he/she wants to lose or gain weight. Encourage your mentee to tell you as much as possible about what he/she is thinking and feeling without providing advice. You should not assume responsibility for solving the problem. Your primary goal should be to actively listen, understand your mentee’s perspective, communicate your understanding and help guide him/her towards finding a solution.

• Ask if there is anything you can do to help him/her with this issue. You might offer to:
  - Provide information that might help your mentee reach his/her goal. For example, help identify situations in which he/she has the freedom to make food choices (dinner at home may not be one of those situations, and it is important to remain sensitive regarding choices that the mentee’s parent or guardian might make for the family). Discuss how he/she might go about making good food choices in those situations. (Refer to the “Plan Meals For a Day” activity and the “Resource Section” for further information.)
  - Help your mentee increase his/her level of physical activity (refer to the “Take a Walk” and “Choosing to Exercise” activities). Explain that even if he/she wants to gain weight, exercise strengthens muscles, and muscles weigh more than fat.
  - Suggest some websites your mentee might visit and help him/her access a computer if needed (see Resource Section). For example, the KidsHealth website has numerous resources, including content by young people themselves, on being overweight or underweight.
  - You can also offer to talk to the mentoring program coordinator who could provide more help.
  - Talk with your mentee about the dangers of “crash” or “fad” diets that limit calories but do not provide adequate nutrition.
**THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND**

- Some potential problems to consider and consult your mentoring program coordinator about include:
  - The possibility that your mentee could be developing an eating disorder, for example if he/she is already quite thin but feels fat;
  - The possibility that your mentee is being teased or bullied because of his/her appearance; or
  - The possibility that your mentee comes from an overweight family and is worried about becoming fat (puberty is often the stage where a child might put on extra weight).

- Children at this age become much more aware of, and influenced by, individuals they admire such as musicians or movie stars. They also have more freedom to explore Internet sites, magazines and other media that portray “perfect” people. Refer to the “Talking About Media Messages and Images” Scenario to help your mentee better analyze these images and the unrealistic perfection they portray.

- Girls in particular may be worried about their weight and may engage in dieting as early as the third or fourth grade. If your mentee talks about dieting, talk to her (or him) about the importance of their body getting the proper nutrients and explain that overall changes in eating habits are much more effective in the long term than diets. If your mentee seems determined to follow a diet, you may choose to learn more about effective diet practices so you can have more educated conversations with him/her.

- It is possible your mentee will bring your weight into the conversation. If you are a healthy weight, you may want to talk about how you eat healthy foods and get adequate exercise to maintain your weight. You may also indicate whether this is hard or easy for you to do. If, on the other hand, you are overweight, you may, if you are comfortable, choose to share your own concerns about your weight. If you do not wish to discuss your weight, an appropriate comment might be, “Everyone faces personal challenges in staying healthy. If you’d ever like my advice on that, I’m here to help.”

- One method used by teens (especially girls) to control weight is smoking. Consult the Healthy Conversations Mentor’s Guide to Preventing Youth Tobacco Use if this is an issue for your mentee.

**Talking About an Eating or Health-Related Behavior You May Have**

Your mentee may observe and ask about your eating or health-related behaviors (such as always eating salad for lunch or parking your car far enough away from the door so you have to walk more). He/she may be observing you in relation to his/her own family’s lifestyle, may be learning about healthy lifestyles in health class and observing you in relation to what he/she is learning, or may simply be curious about you as an important role model in his/her life.

**CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS**

- If the behavior your mentee has observed is an unhealthy one—for example, you frequently eat unhealthy foods in his/her presence, you may be uncomfortable with the question. To give yourself a few moments to think about your response, ask your mentee why he/she wants to know about the behavior. His/her response may provide an indication of which direction to go. It is important to remember that your mentee looks up to you as a role model, so in general it is more helpful to him/her if you can honestly acknowledge that your behavior is unhealthy and indicate your desire to have healthier habits.
• If the behavior your mentee has observed is a healthy one—for example, you always eat salad for lunch, explain to him/her why you do this. Some of the things you may mention include how important your health is to you, how this behavior contributes to your health, or how you decided that this behavior would be helpful.

• Ask your mentee for examples of things he/she does that are good for his or her health. If your mentee cannot think of anything, play a “game” where you take turns thinking of healthy things to eat or healthy things to do. Then ask your mentee which of these things he/she does, or would like to do.

• If your mentee seems interested, you could do the “Plan Meals for a Day” or the “Choosing to Exercise” activity for a future mentoring session and/or use the websites in the “Resource Section” for further information and activities. Encourage him/her to share this activity with a parent, if appropriate (e.g., mentee plans to prepare dinner for his/her family on a given night).

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Your mentee is at an age where youth become much more aware of adult behaviors and think about these behaviors in relationship to their own lives. This may cause you to examine your own behavior when with your mentee. Even if you do not feel totally comfortable with yourself as a role model, it may help to remember that what you say is as important as what you do (as long as you are able to talk about your own limitations).

Plan Meals for a Day With Your Mentee

CONVERSATION

• Ask your mentee if he/she ever helps plan meals at home or has ever thought about having a day where he/she could eat whatever he/she wanted. Show your mentee the “Be Choosy” worksheet and explain that you are going to plan a day of meals and then check to see how healthy they are. Ask your mentee to select foods from the list at the bottom of the page to fill out the menus; ask if there are other foods not on the list he/she would like to use and add them to the menu. Do not worry at this stage about whether the choices are healthy.

• Once your mentee has completed the menus, show him/her the GO, SLOW, WHOA list and review it together to see how healthy the menus are. Your mentee may need help fitting the selected menu foods into the appropriate categories. Discuss how healthy the menu is.

• Just for fun, try the exercise again, choosing all the favorite foods that the mentee and/or you particularly like, such as: candy bars, potato chips, hot fudge sundaes, etc. and see where they fit on the GO, SLOW, WHOA list.

• Using “My Pyramid” (which your mentee may have seen previously in a health class), talk about how scientists have learned what foods the body needs to be healthy. Discuss how many of the food groups you have included in the menus and how your choices compare to the recommended amounts from each group. Talk about how you don’t have to have perfectly healthy meals every day, but your body needs the healthy foods on the pyramid on a regular basis to grow and be strong.
FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

• If feasible within your mentoring program, plan a menu with your mentee, then take him/her shopping to buy the ingredients and make the meal together.
• If you have the opportunity to eat lunch with your mentee at school, discuss what is on the school menu and talk about how healthy the choices are. You can also talk about why people make unhealthy choices.

PROBLEM SOLVING

• If your mentee has weight concerns (overweight, underweight), check out the KidsHealth website for articles about these issues, including kids’ own perspectives and/or talk to your mentoring program coordinator about your mentee’s concerns.

Shopping For Healthy Foods

CONVERSATION

• Ask your mentee if he/she has shopped for food with a parent, and to describe the experience. Does he/she know where different types of food are located in the grocery store?
• Discuss the concept of “my perfect dinner” and what items would be included on the menu.
• Discuss how a grocery store is designed and organized, and how this affects our buying decisions.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

• Go to the local grocery store and purchase your “packaged food dinner” and your “fresh foods dinner.” For both dinners, include a beverage, meat item, potato or noodle, vegetable and dessert.
• At home, record the name of your packaged food items. Then record the calorie and fat content of each item from the information on the can or box.
• Record the name of your fresh food items. Using a chart from an appropriate website, estimate the calorie and fat content of each fresh food item.
• Prepare and eat your dinners on consecutive nights. Discuss and compare the tastes of your dinners.
TALKING ABOUT TEASING AND BULLYING

Teasing and Bullying Due to a Child’s Weight or Appearance

NOTE: Before offering options to the mentee, consult with the program coordinator to determine the best course of action, taking into account the age, gender, personality and behavior history of the mentee, as well as the school environment (e.g., whether staff are committed to preventing and responding to teasing/bullying). For example, an introverted, depressed youth may experience further stress if told to “simply ignore” the teasing and may also lack the assertiveness to tell the perpetrator to stop. On the other hand, an aggressive, acting-out youth may lack the impulse control to ignore teasing and if encouraged to tell the perpetrator to stop, may not be able to do so without getting into a physical fight. Regardless of the individual context of the mentee, all mentees should be urged to tell an adult at school, and the program coordinator should follow up with the school to ensure that staff appropriately address the situation, as required by state law.

INTRODUCTION

Children who are overweight are more likely to be the object of teasing and bullying by their peers. In defense, they may themselves adopt bullying behaviors. Being thinner, smaller or more underweight than their peers can also prompt teasing, especially for boys. These behaviors are particularly prevalent during the middle school years. Whether your mentee is being bullied, is a witness to a bullying incident or participates in a bullying situation, it is important to address the issue. Schools are required to have policies that protect children from bullying and many youth programs have similar policies. Any concerns you may have regarding your mentee and bullying should be brought to the attention of your mentoring coordinator.

Even if your overweight mentee does not bring up the issue of bullying, you may want to be alert for opportunities to bring up the topic yourself; he/she may be ashamed to bring it up. Most children welcome the opportunity to talk to a caring adult about the issue. Your emotional and problem-solving support can be instrumental in helping your mentee cope as a target of bullying or respond appropriately when another child is being bullied.
CONVERSATION SUGGESTIONS

• If your mentee mentions that he/she has been teased or bullied, whether weight-related or not, ask him/her to tell you more about the situation.
  - It is important to just listen at this stage of the conversation, encouraging your mentee to first describe what happened and then to talk about how the situation made him/her feel. These feelings might include embarrassment, anger, shame, hurt, etc. If he/she has difficulty describing feelings, suggest some possible feelings people have in such situations.
  - Ask your mentee what he/she did in the situation. Again, your primary goal is to listen, not to solve the problem at this stage of the conversation. Be prepared that your mentee may have responded in a way you consider inappropriate, such as hitting the offending peer. When he/she has described the response, ask how he/she felt about it at the time and afterwards.
  - Ask your mentee how he/she would like to handle a similar situation in the future. He/she may feel helpless about having to change anything, so you may want to play the problem-solving game by taking turns coming up with alternative solutions. Be prepared in case your mentee was advised by an adult to fight back against the bully. The mentee may be quite direct in saying that nothing is going to change as long as he/she is too fat (or too thin or small). If he/she does not volunteer this information, you can ask if there is anything that, if changed, could help prevent the teasing or bullying.
  - If your mentee’s weight is the underlying factor in the teasing or bullying, and he/she seems to want to change this, consult the “Talking About Your Mentee’s Interest in Losing (or Gaining) Weight” Scenario on page 27. The KidsHealth website also has numerous resources, including content by young people themselves, on being overweight or underweight.

• If your mentee has witnessed a child being teased or bullied, follow the same conversation suggestions as above. If relevant, ask if he/she is worried about becoming a target for teasing or bullying and be prepared to address the weight issue if it seems applicable.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

• Teasing, bullying, social rejection and competition often increase in the middle school years as children become more aware of their peers and form and re-form peer groups. The experience of peer rejection and bullying at this age can be both confusing and painful, especially for children whose physical development is not in sync with what they perceive to be “normal.” If the child does not confide in his/her parents or teachers, he/she may suffer alone with these feelings. Your role as a mentor can be particularly useful in helping him/her negotiate this stage of life.

• It is possible that bullying and teasing are not new experiences for your mentee; he/she may have experienced such behavior for years. If he/she has confided in adults and nothing has changed, he/she may become quite hopeless about the situation. Some children have actually become depressed and suicidal as a result of ongoing bullying. In other cases, the simmering anger the child feels may erupt in more frequent episodes of fighting and other problem behavior. If you have such concerns about your mentee, you should consult your mentoring coordinator.
The following samples illustrate how conversations might unfold in the context of different types of mentoring relationships. The conversations also show how mentor preparation, suggested activities, Web resources and Smart Responses can all work together. These sample conversations are in no way intended as “scripts” for mentors to follow. Instead, they can give mentors ideas about how such conversations might occur with their own mentees. Remember that no conversation is “perfect”—when reading these samples, note what you do and don’t like about the way that the mentor handles the conversation. Always let your mentee lead the way in terms of how far and in what direction you take the discussion.

Sample Healthy Active Lifestyles

CONVERSATION 1
Talking while having a meal together

Janel (Mentee age 11) and Melissa (mentor) have been matched for 6 months. They are meeting at Janel’s favorite fast-food restaurant. Melissa wants to introduce Janel to different types of food other than cheeseburgers.

Mentor: What’s your favorite food here?

Mentee: I love the $9.99 special where you get a burger, fries, soda and free shake.

Mentor: Wow, that sounds like a great deal. How often do you get to go to this restaurant?

Mentee: Sometimes I go once or twice a week with my mom and brothers.

Mentor: What other types of food do you like besides cheeseburgers?

Mentee: Hmm… I love macaroni and cheese, pizza and my mom’s chicken.

Mentor: Oh, those sound delicious. I make a big batch of macaroni and cheese every year for Thanksgiving. Since we both love cheeseburgers and macaroni and cheese, why don’t we try something different together?

Mentee: Sure, as long as I get my free shake.

Mentor: OK, let’s take a look at the menu to see what they have that is different from what we normally eat.

Mentor and mentee look at the menu together to see what new food item they want to try.

Mentor: So for today we said we would order food other than cheeseburgers. Now you’re faced with some choices. Let’s see, they have crispy chicken salad, classic turkey club and grilled chicken pesto sandwich.

Mentee: I don’t like turkey. Oh, what about the Chicken Parmesan Supermelt?

Mentor: That looks interesting, but I think I’m going to get the crispy chicken salad. Do you like salad?

Mentee: Not really. I don’t like vegetables.

Mentor: Did you know that every time you eat a cheeseburger, you’re eating vegetables? Your burger comes with lettuce and tomato. Those are the same things you can find in a salad.

Mentee: I never noticed.

Mentor: Didn’t you say you like chicken?

Mentee: Yes, but only my mom’s chicken. Not everyone can cook chicken like my mom.

Mentor: So on your eating adventure, would you be willing to try either the chicken salad or grilled chicken pesto sandwich?
Mentee: I'll go with the crispy chicken salad. The pesto looks too green.

Mentor: Great! This will be my first time trying the salad, too, so you won't be alone in this new adventure.

Later on Melissa and Janel talk about the chicken salads they ordered.

Mentee: Melissa, you were right. This salad is delicious! The chicken isn't as good as my mom's, but it's pretty close.

Mentor: Oh, that's great. Thank you for being willing to try something different. I'm glad you liked it.

Sample Healthy Active Lifestyles

CONVERSATION 2
Talking while having a meal together

Darryll (mentor) and LaQuan (mentee age 12) have been matched for 7 months. Darryll is currently overweight and has recently come from the doctor's office. Darryll sometimes exercises and often parks far away from retail entrances when in shopping center parking lots. One day, Darryll and LaQuan were going to the mall to participate in a Thanksgiving basket distribution to families in need. LaQuan wanted to know why Darryll parked so far from the mall entrance, passing by parking spaces that were closer to the entrance. Darryll decided to “crack the door” by pointing out a health-related behavior.

Mentor: I hope you don’t mind me passing the closer parking spaces. I like to park as far away from the entrance as possible to get my exercise in for the day.

Mentee: WOW, my mom does the same thing. She does it every time we go somewhere. I don’t like when she does that. She should just drop me and my sister off and then go park the car.

Mentor: Oh, did she tell you why she does that?

Mentee: Yeah, she said she needs the exercise. That does not mean my sister and I need the exercise.

Mentor: Oh, I used to feel the same way when I was your age. There’s actually a situation I’m facing right now concerning my health. Would you like to hear about my situation?

Mentee: I hope it’s not something bad. You’re not sick, are you? Because the last time I talked about health with my mother, my aunt was very sick and she almost died.

Mentor: No, LaQuan, I’m not sick, not yet, but I do have a few thing my doctor has encouraged me to do to stay healthy and in good physical shape.

Mentee: Yeah, I know about high blood pressure. My grandmother had it and she is now in a nursing home. It was because she ate a lot of fried foods and did not get enough exercise every day.

Mentor: I am what they call borderline high blood pressure, which means it can be controlled by diet and exercise. The healthier my diet and the more exercise I get, I won’t have to take medication.

Mentee: I don’t like taking medication, especially pills. I can’t swallow them!

Mentor: I understand, I have difficulty swallowing pills too. But I know that if I exercise it will help so I don’t have to take the medication.

Mentee: Yeah, that's true.

Mentor: By parking far away when I go to the mall or a store, it helps me get some walking in during the course of the day.

Mentee: So how much walking do you do during the day?

Mentor: Well, I try to walk every day during my lunch break.

Mentee: What about what you eat? Do you eat a lot of fried foods like my grandmother did?

Mentor: I used to, but I have cut back a lot, and I eat more food that is broiled, cooked on the grill or steamed rather than fried.
Mentee: Broiled food! Is that when it is in the oven, and not cooked on top of the stove?

Mentor: Yes, you can put the food in the oven, and set it for broil instead of bake.

Mentee: Well, I guess I’m not going to give my mother a hard time when she parks far away in parking lots.

Mentor: Do you think you’d want to talk more about diet and exercise again sometime?

Mentee: Yeah, we can talk about it when we get together next week.

Mentor: Okay, I’ll let you know how my walking schedule is going.

Sample Healthy Active Lifestyles

CONVERSATION 3

Shopping for Healthy Foods

Carmen (mentor) and Jessica (mentee, age 11) have been paired for seven months. Mentor has noticed that Mentee’s parents are overweight and the lunches she eats are often pre-packaged and high in sugar. Mentor decides to address the topic of healthy eating and shopping for healthy foods while eating lunch together.

Mentor: That looks good. Did you pack your own lunch today?

Mentee: No, my mom packs it for me, but she knows what I like.

Mentor: It looks like she does. Do you go grocery shopping with your mom and pick out the food you want her to pack for you?

Mentee: Sometimes, but going to the grocery store can be pretty boring.

Mentor: That’s true, but shopping for groceries can also be kind of fun and helps us to eat healthy and control our weight.

Mentee: Oh, I’m not worried about my weight.

Mentor: Healthy eating allows your body to get the nutrients it needs to grow. Do you remember the last time you went food shopping with your parents? What kinds of things did the two of you buy? Do you remember where the chips and sodas were located? What about the fruits and vegetables? Would you like to hear what I’ve learned about healthy diets?

Mentee: Sure, I don’t really remember ever talking with someone about eating healthy stuff. I always ask my mom to buy me these lunches because they come with a candy bar; they’re my favorite.

Mentor: Grocery stores are designed to try and get shoppers to buy certain things that are often unhealthy and expensive. But focusing on fruits and vegetables and balanced meals can help us avoid that.

Mentee: I don’t really like eating healthy. None of that stuff ever tastes good!

Mentor: I’m glad you shared that with me. Can we plan a tasty meal together, and shop for the ingredients? How do you feel about that?

Mentee: I guess that could be fun. What would we make?

Mentor: It’s up to you, but we should make sure that our dinner covers all the groups in the food pyramid. That means we need a meat, vegetable, noodle or rice…and I’m sure we could find a dessert, too.

Mentee: OK, that sounds pretty good. Let’s do it next time.
MENTOR RESOURCES FOR HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS: GAME ON! THE ULTIMATE WELLNESS CHALLENGE
According to the website, Action for Healthy Kids in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge encourages children and youth — and those who support them — to make better food choices and move more.

ALLIANCE FOR A HEALTHIER GENERATION
The Alliance is a joint project of the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation. The Alliance website is focused on creating healthy school environments. The parent page has a wide range of resource information on topics such as becoming a healthy role model, eating tips, keeping kids active, etc. The Alliance has also created the Mygo Healthy Challenge, to teach kids the basics of healthy eating and living active lifestyles.

AMERICAN COUNCIL FOR FITNESS AND NUTRITION
• Fun, Food & Fitness is a “community-based program developed by ACFN to educate youth on the importance of nutritional balance and physical activity. The Fun, Food & Fitness toolkits with reproducible materials are designed to help individuals and organizations plan, implement, promote and evaluate the effectiveness of health awareness programs to prevent African-American youth from becoming overweight and obese. It is a program that can be implemented by churches, community groups, schools or government.
• Hispanic toolkits are also available to organize activities aimed at Hispanic populations. The Blueprint is written in both English and Spanish. Included are recommendations and tips for shopping, cooking and eating well, ways to increase and improve physical activity told through the story of a Hispanic family on their journey to better health.
• “Charting A Healthy Course” guide is a simple, colorful and easy to understand overview of basic nutrition and exercise principles and information.

AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION
A section for parents has a variety of topical information including ways to help kids have more healthy eating habits and be more active. Topics also address issues, such as: how to limit television time, get non-athletic kids active and dealing with kids who are picky eaters. A section for kids has a variety of informational topics and worksheets on the food pyramid, food choices and exercise. There are links to “What Moves U” and “The Alliance For a Healthier Generation” as described below.

BAM (BODY AND MIND):
A related CDC site, Body and Mind, BAM, is just for young people. The site seems aimed at a middle school age group. It has colorful, interactive activities on nutrition, physical activities and “your body”. Kids can play games on each topic, post and read “brags” on things they are doing to be healthy and download desktop wallpaper.

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL
This U.S. Government site has a wide range of information on healthy lifestyles. Main topics address weight, exercise, nutrition, overweight and obesity. While much of the information is aimed at adults, it provides concise, up-to-date summaries on the key issues. There is also a page specifically for Tips for Parents, including My Pyramid Blast-off, and Body Mass Index calculator.
The Connecticut Department of Public Health has useful information and statistics on childhood obesity in Connecticut. Research and report summaries can be found in the “2009 Connecticut School Health Survey” and the “Healthy Connecticut 2010 Final Report”.

Teen Beat, Basic Exercise and Activity Tracker on this site are interactive activity assessments that provide feedback, suggestions, and a format to set a goal to get more exercise. The other activities on the site seem too simplistic for middle school youth. There is a good, easy to understand Food Pyramid graphic.

According to the website Kidnetic is an advertisement-free, interactive website for 9-13 year olds and their families that communicates healthy eating and active living information. It was created by ACTIVATE, an educational outreach program of the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation developed in partnership with the American Academy of Family Physicians, American College of Sports Medicine, American Dietetic Association, International Life Sciences Institute Research Foundation/Center for Health Promotion and National Recreation and Park Association.

KidHealth is the largest and most-visited site on the Web providing doctor approved health information about children from before birth through adolescence. Created by The Nemours Foundation’s Center for Children’s Health Media, the award-winning KidsHealth provides families with accurate, up-to-date, and jargon-free health information they can use. The site is available in English and Spanish. The kids section, has sections such as “Staying Healthy”, “What Being Overweight Means”, “Be a Fit Kid” and a “Kids Fitness and Nutrition Center”. The teen section has similar sections as well as information on eating disorders, body image and self-esteem.

Connecticut State Department of Environmental Protection interactive website to help Connecticut’s children live active, healthier lives while they enjoy the natural treasures of Connecticut’s state parks and forests. The site has information about the various state parks and special activities taking place at the parks as well as special programs such as the Urban Fishing Program. Passes for free park admission and parking are available at libraries throughout the state.

The Pacific Science Center has a variety of interactive nutrition games, for example one uses a Jeopardy format and another provides the opportunity to build a meal menu and get feedback on the nutrition and calories. These activities would be a good follow-up to a Food Pyramid activity.

This program is aimed at adults interested in helping kids discover the fun in bicycling. According to the website, this program “Introduces kids to the joy of an active life by leading your own bicycle adventure. You’ll be able to give them an experience that will empower them, engage them, and lead them to a healthy lifestyle. We’ve got a bunch of resources available to help you encourage kids to ride their bikes.

- If you and your mentee will have access to a computer, go to the web pages Teen Beat – Basic Exercise and Activity Tracker and CDC Body and Mind physical activities page to review the exercise activity before using with your mentee.
- If you do not have access to a computer, have a conversation about exercising with your mentee.

Review the following materials as possible conversation tools.
- Why Do People Exercise?
- We Can! Fit in Daily
THE OBESITY SOCIETY
This Society is primarily for health professionals, but contains resources and information that would be useful for program coordinators, mentors and families including a fact sheet, Childhood Overweight and another one on Obesity, Bias, and Stigmatization that addresses stigma issues for children.

TRIPS FOR KIDS
This website provides the materials, moral support and inspiration that an individual or group needs to help disadvantaged kids discover the joy of mountain biking. Operating in the United States and Canada, the website opens the world of cycling to at-risk youth through mountain bike rides and Earn-A-Bike programs. The more than sixty Trips For Kids chapters that it supports combine lessons in personal responsibility, achievement and environmental awareness through the development of practical skills, and the simple act of having fun.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE: EAT SMART, PLAY HARD KIDS’ SITE
The “Eat Smart” Campaign encourages and teaches children, parents, and caregivers to eat healthy and be physically active everyday. Eat Smart. Play Hard.™ offers resources and tools to convey and reinforce healthy eating and lifestyle behaviors that are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the MyPyramid Food Guidance System. This site would be most appropriate for the youngest middle school students; it is aimed at 7-10 year olds, but some activities might appeal to 11 year olds.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES: GIRLS’ HEALTH PROJECT
The Girls Health web site, developed by the Office on Women’s Health in the Department of Health and Human Services gives girls between the ages of 10 and 16 reliable, current health information. The site focuses on many health topics that respond to adolescent girls’ health concerns and motivates girls to choose healthy behaviors using positive, supportive and non-threatening messages.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES; NATIONAL HEART AND LUNG INSTITUTE: “WE CAN” PROJECT
According to the website, We Can!™ or “Ways to Enhance Children’s Activity & Nutrition” is a national program designed for families and communities to help children aged 8-13 maintain a healthy weight. The program focuses on three important behaviors: improved food choices, increased physical activity and reduced screen time. The site has an extensive section for parents, downloadable and printable resource materials on healthy eating, saving money on healthy foods, menu planning and grocery shopping, exercise, etc.

WHAT MOVES U
NFL Rush is a website that is a joint project of the Heart Association, the NFL and Kellogg. They describe it as “a cool new site full of creative ideas for getting active.” There are video style games involving various NFL teams and players and kids can earn free stuff. This site is more valuable as a way to initiate talking about exercise and nutrition than as a source of information. It would be a good first step for boys who might not be particularly interested in healthy lifestyle issues.
WITH A FOCUS ON CONNECTICUT’S YOUTH,

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IS A STATEWIDE PUBLIC-PRIVATE ALLIANCE,

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THROUGH LEADERSHIP IN MENTORING AND

PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE, UNDERAGE DRINKING,

ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE.