

# Fitness Program Helps Keep Teens Out of Trouble

By Houkje Ross

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Teens need physical fitness for more than just a healthy heart. Exercise can keep teens out of trouble, off drugs and alcohol, and away from other harmful activities, according to Thomas Collingwood, PhD. Dr. Collingwood is a nationally known sport physiologist and psychologist who developed a fitness program for teens called First Choice.

Dr. Collingwood developed First Choice 10 years ago with a small grant that aimed to decrease the use of drugs among teens. He was then working as the director of education for the Cooper Institute for Aerobics in Dallas, Texas.

Developed specifically for at-risk youth, the First Choice curriculum teaches health as a life skill and aims to prevent substance abuse, delinquency, violence, school drop-outs, and mental health problems. Kids have formal gym time where they learn to assess themselves physically and plan and develop goals, says Dr. Collingwood.

The program also uses formal instruction with a workbook entitled *Taking Charge* that reinforces what the kids learn on the gym floor. The skills they learn can be applied to other areas of their lives, like dealing with stress, substance abuse, nutrition, or violence, said Dr. Collingwood. Additional skills kids learn include self-discipline, responsibility, and respect.

## Versatility and Leadership are Key

Dr. Collingwood designed the program so that it could be used in a variety of institutions like community service or recreation agencies, community-based organizations, schools, rehabilitation settings, and substance abuse and mental health agencies. The program is individually tailored to fit within a specific organization and the existing community is trained on how to implement the program to its teens.

“This is a leadership-driven program and can’t be done without the people who are out on the gym floor working with the kids,” said Dr. Collingwood, who provides a standard 40-hour training to those who will deliver the program. There are basic requirements of an institution. It must dedicate staff to the program, staff must come to the training, agree to run the program for one year, and collect data.

About 80 percent of those institutions he trains are successful in implementing the program, said Dr. Collingwood. Often, other priorities or trouble with funding get in the way. He estimates that about 120 to 150 people have been trained at about 80 different sites, and approximately sixty percent of the 10,000 teens who have gone through the program are minorities.

The program has had dramatic effects on the teens that have gone through the program. Data collected by First Choice shows dramatic changes in teen health behaviors:

- 60 percent decrease in multiple drug use;
- 60 percent decrease in alcohol use;
- 38 percent decrease in anxiety and depression;
- 60 percent decrease in marijuana use;
- 30 percent decrease in cigarette use;
- 40 percent increase in drug and alcohol abstinence;
- 23 percent increase in school attendance;
- 20-27 percent increase in levels of physical fitness; and
- 10 percent increase in grade averages.

## Teens Need Structure

“I think it’s really the structure of the program that separates it from other programs. The kids really crave it because they’re not getting it anywhere else. Many of the kids come from one-parent households with a mom who may be working two or three jobs. Typically these kids would be home alone watching TV. We’ve never had a problem getting the kids involved,” said Capt. Bob Cockrell, from the Illinois National Guard. The Illinois National Guard provides technical assistance to the community-based organizations that have been trained to use First Choice. There is a one year waiting list for the program in our area, according to Cockrell. Another reason the program is so popular is because it isn’t perceived as “wimpy,” said Cockrell. “That makes it okay with the kids’ peers.”

“Most people would disagree with me on this, but I don’t think we have a substance abuse problem in our country. We are just not developing strong kids that can make good choices. The program gives kids the skills they need to set goals and make choices,” said Dr. Collingwood. “When they begin to see improvements on the physical level, their self-esteem goes up and they realize that they can succeed. And once you get them into a positive, active lifestyle, negative behaviors like smoking or drinking don’t seem to fit anymore.”

*For more information on First Choice, contact Fitness Interventions Technologies, Dr. Thomas Collingwood, (972) 231- 8866. ❖*

