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SWINGING HEALTHY

Tennis clinic aims to show kids the benefits of exercise while having fun.

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Exercise can be healthy ... and fun. That was the message at a tennis clinic Wednesday at UC Irvine's Crawford Athletic Center.

The clinic, conducted by tennis personality Vic Braden and his 12-year-old granddaughter, Kaitlyn Hittelman, presented the 46 attendees with tennis lessons and tips and information on the benefit of keeping kids active.

The idea to do something to benefit children began as a community service projects for Kaitlyn's upcoming bat mitzvah. After talking with Braden and hearing of his work as an advisory board member with UC Irvine's Pediatric Exercise Research Center, it evolved to more.

"I thought this would be my bat mitzvah project, but it became personal," Kaitlyn said. She has been preparing for the clinic since July and even recruited her soccer team, the Ninja Turtles, to attend.

Kaitlyn was also concerned with the increase in obesity in children, which is why she decided to focus on exercise. Proceeds for the clinic, which has so far raised \$650, will benefit UC Irvine's Pediatric Exercise Research Center (PERC).

"The bigger part is to create awareness of what PERC is trying to do," Braden said. A psychologist and tennis coach, Braden is also involved in sports research.

The UC Irvine School of Medicine established Pediatric Exercise Research Center in 2002. Among its projects the center will be taking part in the healthy study sponsored by the National Institutes of Health. The study will determine if changes in school food services and physical education classes, along with activities that encourage healthy behaviors, lower risk factors for type 2 diabetes.

Dan Cooper, professor of pediatrics and director of UCI's general clinical research, was on hand at the clinic to share some of his research. He has been studying the effects of exercise on children for the last 25 years.

"Even 25 years ago we started to see the obesity epidemic in children, and now it has become pretty clear that one of the major reasons for childhood obesity is the change in physical activity," Cooper said.

Children are doing less physical activity for a number of reasons, including fewer activities in schools, lack of access to safe places or the idea that it is not safe to let kids get out and play, which is worse in low socio-economic areas, he said.

"The health care cost of obesity will equal the health care cost of tobacco in terms of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, liver disease and lung disease like asthma – these are long term problems," Cooper added.

Cooper's research also revolves around exercise for children with chronic diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, neuromuscular diseases and lung disease.

"If they exercise too much they will end up in the hospital," Cooper said. "It's important to know what is too much for them and what is too little."

This was especially poignant for Ali Wolf of Irvine who attended the clinic with her 7-year-old quadruplets. The quadruplets, Adam, Samantha, Michael and Danny, were born three months premature and as a result three of the four have chronic lung disease.

In addition to lung disease Adam also has cerebral palsy. One of the effects of cerebral palsy is muscle contraction and keeping active is the only way to slow this down, said Wolf, who every morning has to stretch his muscles. But sitting in his wheelchair on Wednesday Adam had no trouble swinging a tennis racket as he tried to hit the balls tossed in front of him.

"I like to hit the balls," said Adam, who was anxious to continue practicing his swing.

Others were also excited to receive a lesson from Braden whose light-hearted commentary kept everyone learning and laughing. He even threw in a lesson on how to take a Hollywood photo. "Look down at your feet and when they count to three then you look up," he told the crowd who gathered for a group photo.

Braden credits his vigor to exercise and playing sports.

"I'm 77 and for me I think why I still have a lot of energy and vitality is that I was pretty heavily involved in many sports," Braden said.

"This is great. He is not like a regular coach, he is a legend," said Sam Yamamuro who took his 12-year-old daughter, Anna, a student at Sierra Vista Middle School.

Anna doesn't play sports, except for a little tennis with her dad, but said she learned from Braden's swinging demonstrations.

"I couldn't do anything before, so when I accomplish something it feels good," Anna said.

Tennis player Tracy Austin and actresses Sasha Pieterse and Andrea Parker were also in attendance to lend their support.

"Exercise is part of who I am," Parker, 36, said. She was a professional dancer before turning to acting and said the dedication she learned while dancing is still part of her life.

Parker met Kaitlyn a year ago on the set of the ABC series, "Less than Perfect," and said she was happy to participate in her philanthropic efforts.

"We all need to give back in the world," said Kaitlyn.

Limit tube time and get your kids moving

Experts recommend that kids get no more than 1 -2 hours of computer or video games a day — most kids get 4-6 hours. Here are some ideas about how to limit your kid's inactive time:

Be active with your kids. Experts say that what kids want more than anything is time with their parents. Don't just send them out to play — go play with them!

Don't position your furniture so the TV is the main focus of the room. Remove TVs from bedrooms.

Practice what you preach. Your kids won't accept being restricted to two hours of TV watching if you can veg out for four hours.

How to get non-athletes to be physically active

Team sports are a great way for kids to get their daily activity requirement, but they aren't for everyone. Here's some ways to encourage your "non-athlete."

Some kids are embarrassed to participate in sports because they don't think they're good enough. If this is the problem, find time to practice together. This may help build confidence.

Some kids just don't like competing in sports. There are lots of other ways to be active. Examples are

swimming, horseback riding, cycling, skateboarding, etc. Find out your child's interests.

Don't make exercise a punishment. Forcing your child to go out and play may increase resentment and resistance. Try using physical activity to counter something your child doesn't want to do. For example, make it a routine that your child can ride a bike for 30 minutes before starting homework after school. Your child will beg for more time outside.

Source: American Heart Association

