

## Mitchell Elementary joins Fit Club

By Christina Elmore  
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Mitchell Elementary School children will have a chance to combat obesity this summer thanks to a new school program called Fit Club.

Children participating in Fit Club will spend Tuesdays and Thursdays from June until September working out, gaining information on nutrition and holding weekly conference calls with a clinician.



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Fit Club Program director Bucky Buchanan (right) runs with participants (left to right) Mya Sheppard, 10, Gabrielle Spencer, 11, and Stephanie Spencer, 10, to keep them motivated.

Louie's Kids, a Charleston-based nonprofit organization that fights childhood obesity, is running the program.

Louie's Kids raises money to provide scholarships to send young people to weight programs and camps such as those run by Wellspring Community Programs.

Wellspring runs nine fitness camps and two year-round boarding schools around the world. The camp costs \$5,950 for a four-week program, or \$8,950 for eight weeks.

This summer Louie's Kids chose to partner with Wellspring to bring the camp to the children. In doing so, the organization was able to reduce costs to \$1,000 per family for a four-month program to be completed locally.

Both organizations are working to end a trend that could shorten the lives of today's youth.

"For the first time in American history, today's kids are not expected to live as long as their parents," said Lev Kaye, managing director with Wellspring. "There's a whole host of medical problems that scientists have found that are caused by obesity, and that's what's leading to shorter lives."

Samuel Wilson said he's interested to see how his daughter Samantha, 12, does in Fit Club.

"Personally, I don't understand why kids at this age have weight issues," he said. "I guess it's because they don't have a whole lot to do. They just come home, lay around and eat."

Samantha Wilson said that she doesn't have a goal for how much weight she wants to lose. "I just want to start eating healthier," she said.

Those running Fit Club hope to address why kids are eating so much and how overeating and weight issues affect them emotionally and psychologically.

Eliza Kingsford, a behavioral coach with Wellspring, will speak with the group of participants weekly on the phone about how they're performing and what they're struggling with.

"What gets a lot of parents hooked is just this idea that finally someone's going to work on more than just the nutrition and the physical activity," Kingsford said.

Samantha Johnson said she hopes that Fit Club will be able to help her son, Kurtis McNeil, 10, learn to manage the anger and stubbornness that go along with his weight problem.

Like Kurtis, Johnson has struggled with weight. "I just lost 102 pounds and I did it on my own," she said.

Johnson, who lost weight for health reasons, chose to manage her own weight by counting calories and walking.

For Louis Yuhasz, the founder of Louie's Kids, this program isn't just about getting kids to lose weight but encouraging them to make healthy choices to lessen their chances of developing diabetes, heart disease and other conditions associated with obesity.

"I'm not here to make skinny kids," Yuhasz said. "We're here to help kids live long healthy lives. It may be as a person of size, but it doesn't have to be as a person of size with disease."

Yuhasz, of Sullivan's Island, founded Louie's Kids seven years ago. Morbid obesity contributed to the death of his father.

He said the organization has raised about \$250,000 over the past seven years.

Yuhasz sees the summer program being offered to Mitchell students as a chance to get children to volunteer in the community.

"I believe that everybody's been given an incredible gift so we're going to pay it forward," he said. "It might be by cleaning up a park. It might be by walking with some senior citizens. It could be a whole host of things, but I believe that we have something that we can offer the community and those around us."

If the program proves successful, Yuhasz hopes to bring Fit Club to more schools. "This is poised for great success and I will move a mountain to make sure this works, and that I bring it everywhere to kids just like these," he said in a release.

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