**A healthier world starts with healthier youth**

*Investing in child health is one of the most important things a society can do to build a better future – say our Vitality panel of global health and wellbeing experts.*

“A big reason why we’re here having this discussion is the harrowing prediction that ours is the first generation of children set to have a shorter life span than their parents[[1]](#footnote-1),” begins Mari Leach, Biokineticist at Vitality in South Africa. “This shorter life expectancy is mostly attributed to obesity and its impact on developing chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. Globally, less than 20% of adolescents (11-17) meet recommendations for physical activity[[2]](#footnote-2) and poor nutrition is on the rise worldwide. While there have been incredible advances in medical and wellness technology, we need to do more to counterbalance the growing increase in lifestyle-related risk factors for our kids.”

“It is important to note from the onset that children are not simply ‘small adults’ and should not be categorized like this in terms of health initiatives and solutions,” Leach adds. “Child health is unique and evolving and at Vitality we are committed to finding relevant ways to improve the health of our younger generations.”

The positive news is that we are seeing global progress in certain health metrics[[3]](#footnote-3), particularly when we look at mortality rates of young children. This said, a great deal of work remains to make sure we’re building a stable environment for children to thrive and enjoy healthier, happier, longer lives.

“That’s why this is a double challenge for child health,” says Jonathan Dugas, Director of Clinical Development for Vitality USA. “More than half of child deaths are linked to conditions that could be easily prevented and treated with the right healthcare access[[4]](#footnote-4). At the same time, we need to focus on improving lifestyle factors including pro-health behaviours linked to food and physical activity.”

**Vitality benefits: from 6 to 60**

Dr Mosima Mabunda, Head of Vitality Wellness in South Africa, references the World Health Organization’s (WHO) goal for child health[[5]](#footnote-5): to help all children celebrate their 10th birthday in good health. “And of course we want to add a zero to that through our platform,” she says. “Vitality helps members add extra healthy(!) years to their life[[6]](#footnote-6) and our aim is to partner with people from early childhood to be part of their journey of health throughout various life stages. We’ve designed our programme with age-related health in mind so that whether you’re 6, 16 or 60, you have access to the right knowledge, tools and incentives to encourage you to make those healthier choices”.

The simple science behind Vitality is to encourage ongoing behaviour change. The Vitality formula that helps achieve this is based on principles rooted in behavioural economics where healthier decision-making is made fun, easy, accessible and more rewarding. “A big part of what we try instil in people, from as early an age as possible, is that the healthy option can be your preferred option,” Dr Mabunda emphasises.

In findings taken from a Vitality-led research report called the Healthy Active Kids South Africa (HAKSA) Report Card[[7]](#footnote-7), researchers found that the main areas of concern for child health is primarily linked to high amounts of screen time and sedentary behaviour, as well as low fruit and vegetable consumption, and high intake of sugary foods and beverages such as soft drinks[[8]](#footnote-8). “Published by the South African Journal of Child Health, these findings reflect a global trend,” continues Dr Mabunda. “And we’re seeing these same patterns of unhealthy lifestyle behaviours increasing around the world.”

### **A recipe for disaster**

“Let’s look first at nutrition”, continues Belinda Kahler, Nutritionist at Vitality in South Africa. “Too much sugar is being consumed by children from a very young age and unfortunately we know the negative impact this has on both child health and overall development.”

High sugar consumption is linked to a host of chronic disease – higher blood pressure, inflammation, weight gain, diabetes, and fatty liver disease, all of which are all linked to an increased risk for heart attack and stroke[[9]](#footnote-9). In the context of sugary beverages, increased consumption leads to an increased risk for obesity, particularly concerning for children and adolescents. “This is because sugary drinks are a significant source of added sugar but do not make you full. Generally, people do not eat less to compensate for the extra calories they drink[[10]](#footnote-10),” notes Kahler. “And the resultant impact is alarming. Frighteningly, research shows that just one can a day translates into a 26% greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes[[11]](#footnote-11).”

“Children are highly impressionable during their early growth and start to learn eating and exercise habits that they will take with them into adulthood,” says Christine Brophy, VP of Behaviour Change at Vitality Global. “An overweight or obese child is five times more likely to become an overweight or obese adult, than a child with a healthy Body Mass Index (BMI)[[12]](#footnote-12)”. Physical health aside, overweight children get tired, frustrated and upset more easily and this can lead to poor states of mental health – even depression – with children feeling emotionally isolated from their peers[[13]](#footnote-13).

**Behaviours that track into adulthood**

From a physical activity perspective, not only is regular exercise necessary for child growth and development, getting active promotes connectedness and inclusiveness within social environments – teaching children important life skills that they’ll carry with them.

Tonja Dodd, Senior Health Strategy Analyst at Vitality USA, notes that when we, as adults, think about exercise we picture a gym with a treadmill or structured exercise class. For kids, though, exercise is often just about playing. “For children, the recommended amount of exercise is 60 minutes a day[[14]](#footnote-14) and 10 hours of sleep a night[[15]](#footnote-15) to reduce their risk of becoming overweight or obese, and so we need to build environments where movement is prioritised,” says Dodd. “We can minimise sedentary behaviour in schools by encouraging activity breaks between lessons and making sure children have access to afterschool sports or playground facilities.”

“Outside of school, we need to invest in community initiatives like parks to play in and organised sports events. At home, and I’d argue the success of all other initiatives stems from this, we need parents to engage in physical activity with their children. This year, I gave my 10-year-old daughter ice skates and she attends regular lessons, as an example. Another activity I do weekly is to take my daughter (and husband!) on hiking trails for exercise and to spend time outdoors. The activity can be as simple as going for a walk, playing hide-and-seek, or dancing together.”

Dodd’s advice to parents and caregivers? Give gifts of health. “A tip I was given years back, and one that I now give to others, is to give children gifts related to health and wellness. A football instead of a video game or a family cooking class rather than a takeout meal.”

Role models are very important here. Those who play an influential role in children’s lives can help to encourage healthier patterns of Behaviour towards better health. Vitality Ambassador and Olympic Gold Medallist, Wayde van Niekerk, takes his role in this seriously, hoping to encourage healthier living through his own lifestyle. “I was fortunate to grow up with that focus on an active and healthy lifestyle, something which I’m very passionate about today,” he says, adding: “Being healthy helps children achieve the dreams they set. And now that I’m a parent, I realise how crucial it is that we be the first to lead by example”.

**Raising healthy kids with Vitality**

“What we’ve found through rolling out the Vitality platform globally – now in 40 markets impacting more than 30 million lives,” says Dinesh Govender, Vitality South Africa CEO, “is that when we nurture healthy families from the start, encouraging good habits in children, we help them become healthy adults”.

A central part of this looks at incentives and gamification[[16]](#footnote-16) to make healthier choices the fun – and easy – choice. “We’re designing a lot of our new health products and benefits with this as our guiding light,” adds Govender. “Think back to when Pokémon Go[[17]](#footnote-17) first came out, the virtual-cross-reality smartphone game that had everyone chasing Pokémon physically in the real world. Studies into this showed how this boosted physical activity in children and adolescents – and even adults got involved. Exciting innovation like this is what we need more of.”

Another successful initiative has been the Vitality partnership with parkrun. This is a great example of family fun that helps to drive better health outcomes. Now in multiple countries around the world, these free, timed, 5km outdoor walks or runs are open to all and encourage families to get outside and get active, together.

“Rising rates of childhood obesity now can mean higher prevalence of other non-communicable diseases later – things like diabetes, hypertension, and the leading cause of death in many developed countries, heart disease,“ says Dr Jonathan Dugas, a long-time health consultant for Vitality USA with a PhD in Exercise Science.  “Vitality can play an important role by helping both kids and parents focus on health-promoting behaviours like eating less refined foods and being active.  If we get it right, we can add years to every Vitality member’s life – whether they are a child or an adult,” says Dr Dugas.

The Vitality programme is based on research from global health bodies such as WHO and they follow stringent health guidelines when designing benefits. An example of this interplay between health guidelines and incentives is the Vitality HeathyFood benefit. “From the age of 2,” says Lee Corrigan, VP pf Product Development at Vitality Global, “WHO recommends we eat a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, a variety of protein foods and good oils. We have built these recommendations into our programme where members are rewarded for purchasing these types of heathy food.” Here, Vitality members are offered discounted prices or regular cashbacks for choosing healthier options when grocery shopping at partner stores.

**Healthy head start**

The panel also agrees that the simplest way to protect your child over the age of 2 from chronic conditions like obesity, heart disease and cancer is to take them for yearly health screenings to measure their weight and blood pressure. Paediatricians also prescribe regular screenings to check their vision, hearing and oral hygiene.

This may sound like a lot to take in if you’re a new parent, but Brophy suggests three science-based ways to nurture healthy habits from a young age: make it a default family activity, make it fun, and let your children come up with reasons to do it so that they buy-into the idea.

**Nutrition + physical activity + screenings**

“If every individual – parent, educator, or member of the public – makes one positive change in the way they eat or move, we can create a revolution that influences our children for the better. Our role is to help children grow up as productive, healthy adults in our world,” concludes Brophy.

And Vitality offers the tips, tools, and incentives to achieve this.

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