

Empowering Adolescents to Make HEALTHY CHOICES

Program leaders working with preteens and teens are often concerned with eating disorders. Bringing up 5-2-1-0 and discussing healthy behaviors in a positive way does not cause disordered eating. In fact, research supports the idea that interventions like 5-2-1-0 Let's Go! may actually help prevent eating disorders in early adolescent girls.¹



Adolescence is a time of major physical, mental, and social change. During this time, food and exercise become more sensitive topics than they once were. It can be challenging for adults to discuss healthy eating and active living with preteens and teens, but it is critically important. Research shows that adolescents in the U.S. receive too much screen time, sugary drinks, and fast food, and not enough physical activity, fruits, and vegetables. Involving youth in your Let's Go! efforts can empower them to make the 5-2-1-0 behaviors a part of their lives and can increase the effectiveness of your Let's Go! efforts.

Here are some ideas for partnering with and engaging older youth in your Let's Go! efforts, empowering them to make healthy choices.

- **Invite youth to be a part of your Let's Go! team.** They will have unique insights into the approach you take to your Let's Go! work. Involving youth not only empowers them to make changes, but also provides an opportunity to focus the work on what is most relevant to their lives. Have them help you complete the Let's Go! Action Plan, and assign them responsibilities to help implement your 5-2-1-0 goals throughout the program year.
- **Give adolescents new responsibilities.** Try asking them to play a role in creating menus and preparing snacks and meals at your program. Refer to the **Cooking with Kids** handout in the 'Step 3: Strategy 1: Limit Unhealthy Choices' tab of the toolkit.
- **Guide adolescents toward their own healthy decisions rather than setting too many rules and restrictions.** Try setting up a sugary drink display and encourage group or peer-to-peer discussion about the health impacts of excessive sugar intake. Refer to the **Make Your Own Sugar Bottle Display** handout in the 'Step 3: Strategy 2: Limit Sugary Drinks' tab of the toolkit.

¹ Austin SB, Kim J, Wiecha J, Troped PJ, Feldman HA, Peterson KE. School-based overweight prevention intervention lowers incidence of disordered weight-control behaviors in early adolescent girls. Arch. Pediatr. Adolesc. Med. 2007; 161 (9): 865-869.

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- Engage adolescents in friendly competition. The 5-2-1-0 Poster Contest is a great example (students at Portland’s Deering High School loved it)! Refer to the **Hold a 5-2-1-0 Poster Contest** handout in the ‘Step 3: Strategy 1: Limit Unhealthy Choices’ tab of the toolkit.
- Create a mentorship program. Partner with a program that serves younger children and have adolescents serve as 5-2-1-0 mentors. You may choose to have the older youth lead energizers and games from the **5-2-1-0 Physical Activities: A ‘Redy-to-Go’ Book of Energizers and Games** (in the front pocket of the toolkit).



For more information and ideas on empowering and partnering with youth, check out:

- Maine Youth Action Network (www.MYAN.org)
- Positive Youth Development Resource Manual (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/21946>)

“The adolescent years are a pivotal period in a youth’s life. Even though it may seem like many teens want nothing to do with adult suggestions or guidance, they do observe and learn from healthy role models around them, and this translates into a lifetime of healthy habits. The Let’s Go! program provides the tools that enable adults to partner with adolescents while improving their own health at the same time.”

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