



FitKids sends coaches to schools in East Palo Alto, Redwood City and Menlo Park to lead children in after school fitness activities.

## The Fit Kids Foundation Brings Structured Fitness Activities to Underserved Children

By David Jacobson | Photos by Gino de Grandis

**T**alk to any of the hundreds of elementary school children in underserved communities who benefit from The Fit Kids Foundation programs, and you are likely to hear a common refrain. With a gap-toothed grin comes some variation of “I love Fit Kids!”

Why? Because children, especially the underserved, desperately need more opportunities for structured physical activity, and Fit Kids ([www.FitKids.org](http://www.FitKids.org)) provides that at no cost to participating schools and children.

It is no secret that obesity and diabetes epidemics are ravaging our nation’s population and that screen time dominates kids’ lives, regardless of socio-economic standing. Couple those trends with the lack of access to safe, structured sports and fitness facilities and programs in underserved communities, and you see kids in crisis.

Fit Kids has a solution!

For five school sites in East Palo Alto, Redwood City and Menlo Park, Fit Kids sends its trained coaches to run after-school programs several times per week to lead children in pre-kindergarten through second grade through sets of fitness activities (sit-ups, push-ups, jumping jacks, air squats, etc.) as well as games, such as Capture the Flag and Dodgeball. At roughly 20 more sites in the South Bay, East Bay, Houston and Los Angeles, Fit Kids trains PE teachers and other coaches based at the sites to deliver its program.

In addition to paying the coaches, Fit Kids also offers equipment, including medicine balls, hula hoops, jump ropes, rope ladders and cones. “That’s where much of our expenses lie,” says Ashley Hunter, who founded Fit Kids in 2011 and serves as executive director. “We are so grateful for the board members, donors and foundations, who help us make ends meet so we can deliver and expand this much-needed program.”

Expansion will occur by increasing the age range Fit Kids currently serves, establishing more sites in the cities where Fit Kids already

operates, and launching programs in Las Vegas. “We steadily refine our curriculum,” Hunter says, “and we continue adding to our coach training and education.”

The programs work. A test administered at the start of a school year benchmarks participants’ levels of agility, speed, strength, and flexibility. Tests at the mid point and end of the year show the participants making significant progress in these measures. Beyond the obvious health benefits, national reports from The Aspen Institute Sports and Society Program indicate that children’s physical activity and sports participation is a predictor of academic success; avoiding risky behavior in terms of drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and unsafe sex; and healthier lifestyles and career achievement in adulthood.

In addition to the children Fit Kids impacts directly, the program begins to seep into the school culture. “Sometimes, at recess the next day, the students who are in Fit Kids are teaching the other kids what they’ve learned,” says Lizbeth Carlos, site supervisor at East Palo Alto’s Los Robles Magnet Academy. “They’re out there doing their drills. It’s really impressive to see. Even our kindergartners are like, ‘Hey, we’re doing jumping jacks. Come on, and let’s count.’ Seeing that is really fun.”

Along with the programs that constitute the bulk of Fit Kids’ positive impact, the organization boasts an Honorary Board of accomplished pro sports figures, such as Ronnie Lott Eric Byrnes, Dave Kaval, and Joe Staley. Lott, the 49ers legend, will receive Fit Kids’ Change Maker Award as a highlight of the Children’s Champions fundraiser on May 19, 2018 at Menlo College. The annual family-friendly event offers attendees the chance to participate in a wide variety of fitness challenges, sports, games, and other activities with many Stanford University athletes. Children’s Champions also offers a silent auction, healthy food and beverage choices, and an educational panel discussion.

Also on tap for 2018 is The Fit Kids Games, a multi-sport competition and festival for corporate teams that will raise funds for the organization. “We are launching this new event, because more and more people all the time are realizing the importance of physical activity, especially for underserved youth,” Hunter says. “We know that with all the community-minded corporations and individuals throughout the Bay Area, they are going to rally around this critical cause.”

FitKids’ annual fundraiser, Children’s Champions, is scheduled for May 19 at Menlo College

