
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Play 60 Influences Next Generation

To tackle childhood obesity, the NFL is focusing on educating children about exercise and nutrition. Julie Buehler reports.

By Julie Buehler

January 2012



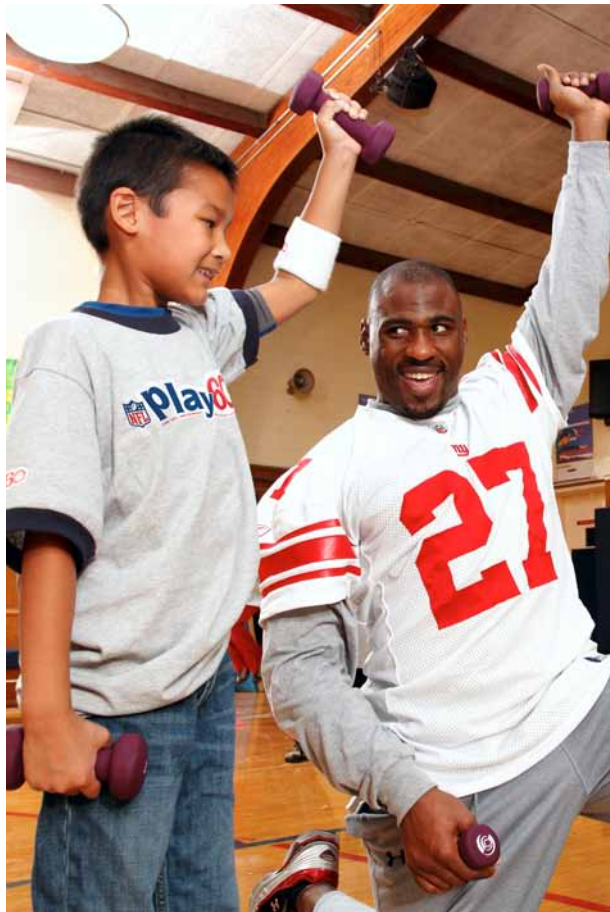
All images: Courtesy of the NFL

Ever watched in awe as someone obliterates a workout?

Ever seen a human juggernaut explode through barriers?

It's not only inspirational but it also has the ability to compel you to action unlike any written article, spoken word or AC/DC song. It's the power of example.

1 of 5



Players like Brandon Jacobs of the New York Giants are working to get more kids involved in fitness and sports.

With childhood obesity rates becoming super-sized and the problem creating widespread social and economic concerns, the country's most popular, profitable and influential sport is aiming to educate children about exercise and nutrition.

The NFL's Play 60 message is simple: implore children to play 60 minutes a day, every day. It's as long as National Football League athletes play on Sundays, and the program is a national initiative funded by the league, which has committed more than \$250 million to the cause.

The Beginning

The journey began with "What Moves You," a school program developed some years ago by NFL Charities and the American Heart Association. The concept was to implement an in-school program to get children moving, even in the classroom.

"We recognized that there was a problem (with childhood obesity). Our partners were telling us that (physical-education classes were) being cut across the country. We knew that the trends of obesity among the youth were just at unbelievable rates, and we were looking for some way to help," said Anna Isaacson, NFL director of community programs.

"We knew that the trends of obesity among the youth were just at unbelievable rates, and we were looking for some way to help."

—Anna Isaacson

The program gained traction and corporate sponsors lined up. Meanwhile, the NFL saw the success of "What Moves You" and the effect professional athletes had on children exercising. Thus, it expanded its in-school program to become a national campaign in 2007.

It's been a labor-intensive project, Isaacson said.

"When you have a bunch of voices speaking as one on a topic that really resonates, you have more success," she said. "(We have the) community-relations department, marketing department, public-relations department, all these groups coming together and saying, 'This is such an important issue,' and working together on it. (We know) that we're stronger as one unit, and we were really able to take a stand and say, 'This is what we want the league to stand for.'"

Play 60 now boasts programs in more than 77,000 schools nationwide, Isaacson said, and has hosted more than 1,500 Play 60 events since 2007.

"This campaign is really about reversing the trend of childhood obesity. Our tagline is to make the next generation of youth more active and healthy," she said. "So when we started this campaign, we didn't really see it ending. We know we are not the experts on the science, and we rely on our partners to tell us how it's going. And if this is still an issue in five years, then we'll be there fighting it."



Fitness can be fun for kids, especially in a class led by star quarterback Drew Brees.

Grassroots Approach

Although NFL teams fill stadiums with tens of thousands of people each week of the season and generate billions of dollars yearly, Play 60 is a grassroots movement that each of the 32 franchises implements on the local level.

“When you have a bunch of voices speaking as one on a topic that really resonates, you have more success.”

—Anna Isaacson

Former Commissioner Paul Tagliabue started the movement, and current Commissioner Roger Goodell stuck with it.

“Commissioner Tagliabue always used to say, and this is something commissioner Goodell lives by as well, ‘There are really two pillars to the NFL: one is football and the other is community,’” Isaacson said.

The key is educating one child at a time; for the Indianapolis Colts, that requires three departments collaborating on the NFL’s mission, said Stephanie Mathes, Colts community-relations director.

“(It’s a) very grassroots approach,” she said. “We’re able to interact with kids on a one-on-one basis ... and (are) able to take our community-relations department, our youth-football department, and we’ve also engaged our mascot, Blue, knowing that that character really resonates, especially with the younger kids.”

Mathes added: “Even if we put on some big event and we can just influence one child to stop and think about what (they’re) eating or make them go outside and play, then that’s what it’s about.”

Like the NFL, the Colts see their responsibility to the community reaching far beyond a scoreboard, she said.

“Being a part of this community and being more than a sports league or a sports team has always been important.”

—Stephanie Mathes

“Being a part of this community and being more than a sports league or a sports team has always been important,” Mathes said. “But I think we’ve always been searching for

that niche and how we can really home in on something and focus and see some impact and see results. And when the NFL started looking at it, there was such a natural tie to health and fitness, especially with kids.”

Helping Indianapolis youth is not new to the Colts, but the NFL’s lead has made it so the message is delivered more effectively, Mathes said.

Play 60 allowed league teams to unite “behind one specific message, one specific brand and put all of our health and fitness programs under that brand to make it more identifiable and make it resonate more,” she said.

The Colts build playgrounds; renovate fitness rooms; and take players, coaches, cheerleaders and their mascot into middle schools, elementary schools and community youth centers to share the Play 60 message. Because of this focus on the issue, Mathes said, other local businesses are beginning to recognize the value of teaming up to tackle childhood obesity.



The NFL is using its influence to fight childhood obesity and encourage children be more active and healthy.

"We were able to create a platform," she said. "More people want to get involved with this issue as they see it's tied with the Colts, and they see that as a very trustworthy brand that resonates with that younger generation."

Leading by Example

The irony is that when some think of the NFL, one of two images comes to mind:

The first is an oversized fan holding a beer in one hand and wearing a foam finger on the other while sporting as much body paint as Michelangelo used on the Sistine Chapel, cheering and shouting as his girth undulates in perfect unison with his monosyllabic expressions.

The second is a prototypical player with chiseled muscles and sharp features. His jersey looks woefully inadequate to contain his biceps, let alone his thick chest or powerful shoulders.

The two images are diametrically opposed yet work perfectly in conjunction. Without the unwavering passion of the fans, the NFL and its players would not have the platform from which to educate children on exercise and nutrition. And nothing demonstrates the NFL's commitment to that platform like the grand prize handed out at the NFL Play 60 Super Kid.

Before the contest closed, any child could visit NFLRush.com/Superkid to tell of his or her fitness activities and how he or she implemented the Play 60 message. The winning child, James G., won an all-expenses-paid trip to Super Bowl XLVI in Indianapolis and will run the game ball onto the field on Feb. 5 before the most watched single-day sporting event on the planet.

It's the strength of example and the inspiration of action that the NFL employs to help shape the next generation to be healthier and more educated than the previous one.



Courtesy of Julie Buehler

About the Author

Julie Buehler is a freelance writer and sports broadcaster. She's covered the NFL, NBA, MLB and college football in Southern California and Arizona for more than a decade. She's as well known for her prolific flexing as she is for her grasp on the English language. Julie has competed in Fight Gone Bad and The Marine Corp Challenge with Desert CrossFit in Palm Desert, Calif.