



Centro de Salud de la Comunidad del South End

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Promoting Health and Wellness

A Conversation with Malcolm Matheson

Malcolm Matheson has coordinated the WIN (Weight Initiative Now) program at the South End Community Health Center since 2014.

WIN (Weight Initiative Now) is a multidisciplinary pediatric weight management program at the South End Community Health Center. It's also a part of Boston Children's Hospital's Fitness in the City Program, which is a network of 10 Boston health centers addressing the problem of obesity by providing families with case management services, education on nutrition and wellness and opportunities to access physical fitness activities. Fitness in the City has shown to be effective in helping participants make the behavioral changes needed to maintain a healthier weight. Since 2003, the WIN program has served more than 700 youth in the South End and nearby communities.

Why have you decided to work with children?

With children you really have a chance at shaping the future. Kids are at that pivotal point where their actions are becoming habits, and you want to get in there and help make sure they are good habits. If you connect with kids, you have a chance to make a big difference. We are starting a new research project here about kids' awareness and choices around junk food and unhealthy eating. They will be keeping a picture food journal to help them reflect on certain aspects of their eating experience. Then, they rate each meal on factors like nutrition and taste and their own mood in the hope that it will influence their eating habits.

What is your background?

I was raised by my mom in Worcester with my sister and two brothers. My mom grew up in Peru with very little, moved to the U.S. when she was my age, and then achieved so much. She is such a strong woman, and she's the reason I am who I am today. She's my hero. I went to Northeastern, where I studied psychology with a focus in cross-cultural studies. I also studied Mandarin for four years in college and spent a year in China teaching English to blind students.

What is your day like?

A big portion of my day is case management. The touchstone of case management is regular contact with patients and families. The goal here is support—making sure patients and families have what they need to succeed in staying active and eating healthy.

A typical day includes many conversations, either in the clinic or on the phone. Sometimes these are follow-up conversations related to a previous issue, and sometimes they are just to listen. A parent wants to tell us when his or her child is making progress. Recently, a mom called excitedly to tell me how much healthier her daughter looks since cutting out soda. And families really appreciate the regular phone calls. For teens in the program, we communicate with them directly, mostly by texting.

I also run a lot of after-school programs, which are fun because I get to hang out with the kids. We also do a lot of special events. We recently ran a workshop where the kids made smoothies, then calculated the nutritional value. We made it a contest and the smoothie with the most fiber in it won. As for physical activity, we're trying to create lifelong health habits by fostering pre-existing interests of each child—creating future dancers, soccer players, or gymnasts, for example, by enrolling kids in programs aligned with what they already like to do.

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

Working directly with kids and families. I love being able to share in their joys, and it's such a great feeling when a mom or dad turns to me for help. I enjoy connecting families with resources, whether it's getting a bike or finding a summer camp or taking karate lessons.

What's the most challenging?

Seeing a family get bad news about their child's health. One mom called recently to say that her 4-year-old daughter had just received a difficult diagnosis. She was devastated. I tried not to show it, but so was I. We spent nearly an hour on the phone that day. She has support from some excellent doctors, and she knows we're here for her whatever she needs.

What is your life like outside of work?

I started a family garden project here in the South End. I really enjoy gardening. I grow tomatoes and basil and things like that, but I mostly concentrate on what the kids want to grow.

(Left) Malcolm Matheson outside the South End Community Health Center.