Teaming up to help fight flab

The Trim and Fit clubs in schools will give way to weight loss programmes of healthier proportions. Michelle Neo discovers how one such concept inspired some students to battle the bulge.

They call themselves Team Ohana. Their mission: To help 16 overweight students from Holy Innocents' High School (HIHS) win the battle of the bulge.

Their strategy: Exercise, nutrition and a healthy body image.

About a month ago, the team of seven Singapore Management University (SMU) students put their plan into action, committing about six hours a week to conducting the weight-loss programme as part of a Community Service Project.

The school already had a Trim-and-Fit (TAF) programme, but Team Ohana - touting the mantra “be your best self, be healthy” - wanted to do more as it felt that there was not enough focus on building the confidence of the participants.

Also, many students viewed TAF, an obesity-fighting initiative implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1992, with a tinge of dread and embarrassment. TAF members are sometimes teased by their peers, who see it as a club for fat kids.

Grained Chan Yong Shun, 12: “Most of what we do is senseless running for two to three times a week. Even though there are weekly games, I never really enjoyed it.”

Enter Team Ohana, which by its name alone embraces the spirit of mutual support. According to the Disney animated movie Lilo & Stitch, the word Ohana means “family”, and family means nobody gets left behind, or forgotten.

The spirit of Ohana helped forge strong friendships during the month-long endeavour.

This element of peer support was an important source of motivation and encouragement for the students, said team leader Jackson Tan, 23.

It also ensured that every one of the 16 students were pushed to their limit when it came to the number of sit-ups, push-ups and star-jumps they had to do.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Team Ohana's project was the injection of fun, in the form of games like Ultimate Frisbee and Floorball.

(Through the programme) I learnt that exercise can be fun. I don't feel like it is a chore any more,” said Ong Leng Kair, 12, who has been in TAF since primary school.

It yielded results, too. Each student lost an average of 0.5kg to 1kg at the end of the programme, making most of them feel fitter and stronger.

The team also confronted the main cause of weight gain - poor eating habits. The students were instructed in the art of calorie counting and healthy snacking.

“We taught them to make better decisions in their diets. For example, eating roast chicken would amount to about 500 calories, but that would still be better than having a bag of chips, at around 1,000 calories," said Mr Tan, a former physical education teacher at Anderson Junior College.

Not an individual effort

The students were also given a handbook compiled by the team, with the help of nutritionists from Alexandra Hospital. It comes complete with nutritional information for different foods, exercise tips and even a journal where students can write about their weight-loss efforts.

Team Ohana’s holistic approach towards fitness was welcomed by the school’s vice-principal, Ms Christina Michael, 46.

"Fitness is not just about the way you look, but also about how you feel about yourself," said Ms Michael, who was overweight as a child.

The programme extends beyond exercise and helps students adopt a healthy lifestyle," she added. On its website, the MOE states that each school runs its own TAF programme according to its students’ needs.

In other schools, similar programmes have taken root.

While Pei Hwa Primary’s Fun and Fitness club (which replaced its TAF club in 2002) offers activities such as rugby and badminton, Naval Base Primary has a smart-card system where students can track their caloric intake when choosing food from their canteen.

"Weight loss is not just an individual effort... it requires the support of peers, parents and the school,” said Ms Michael.

Ultimately, it is an obstacle that only they can overcome. What we can do is to empower, equip and encourage them.”

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