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Reality TV for Children, With Better Health as the Prize

By [FELICIA R. LEE](#)

Chris, an 11-year-old from San Francisco, is a fitness buff and athlete whose perspective on the galloping rates of childhood obesity mostly comes from what he sees and knows.

"A lot of kids who are younger are obese," said Chris, a sixth grader who plays basketball, skateboards and lobbies his middle school for better food choices. "They feel uncomfortable with themselves. They don't really talk to anyone. They just sit down and eat their lunch."

He's in great shape himself, Chris said. And anyone who wants to see how he stays that way, as well as helping his community stay fit, can turn on the television on Sunday. Chris is one of two boys and two girls taking part in a reality show for the tweener set called "Let's Just Play Go Healthy Challenge," to have its premiere at 8:30 p.m. on Nickelodeon. The mini-series concludes with the network's third annual Worldwide Day of Play on Sept. 30, when Nickelodeon goes off the air for three hours to encourage viewers to switch off the television and get active.

The "Challenge" special on Sunday will have as its hosts Devon Werkheiser from "Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide" and Miranda Cosgrove from "Drake & Josh," both Nickelodeon series. The health quests of the four students will be followed in regular monthly intervals through 10- to 15-minute segments, broadcast on Sundays. The first follow-up will be June 4.

"Challenge" will follow Chris; 14-year-old Wes from Phenix City, Ala.; 11-year-old Ayesha from Farmington Hills, Mich.; and 13-year-old Bianca from Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., as they try to create healthier lifestyles. The mini-series, Nickelodeon executives said, takes place against the backdrop of a nationwide explosion in obesity rates among adults and children.

About 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are overweight, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. The problem is so serious that some school districts are beginning to ban soft drinks or whole milk, and many parents and educators are calling for more exercise programs and nutrition education.

"This came in response to the idea that kids are overscheduled, that with urban sprawl parents are afraid to let their kids go outside and play, and in schools recess is being eliminated," said Marva Smalls, chief of staff at Nickelodeon, Nick at Nite, TV Land and Noggin.

As difficult as it is for adults to exercise and eat better, Ms. Smalls said, it can be even more challenging for children because they have less control over their lives.

But unlike the many reality shows about people undergoing plastic surgery or drastic diets, the

"Challenge" mini-series features students who have goals broader than weight loss.

Wes is concerned about the health of those in his family as they enjoy high-fat Southern food. Ayesha wants to become more active. Bianca is looking for a healthy sport. Chris's goals include being a healthy role model for other children. The students began their health programs about two weeks ago and check in with a local "challenge" coach each week for help.

"I want to lose 30 pounds," Ayesha, a cellist and Girl Scout who attends a suburban Detroit school, said in an interview. But she said that unlike some girls her age who aspire to be model-thin, "I don't want to be skinny; I want to be healthy."

Bianca is an active tennis player and runner who threw out her junk food a while ago and doesn't need to lose weight. She wants to learn how to stay on track.

Because Wes wants to lose 40 to 50 pounds and could not do so on his family's diet, his mother, Lori, is now reading food labels and cooking differently. The whole family of four is taking walks. Wes plays golf and is now considering tennis or baseball for a more strenuous workout.

Jerome D. Williams, a consumer psychologist and professor of advertising at the University of Texas at Austin, said he was glad to see a children's television network follow the health quests of real children. Dr. Williams is one of the authors of an Institute of Medicine report last year on the marketing of junk food to children and teenagers.

"TV gets really hammered for two reasons: the advertising, and if you're sitting in front of a television you're engaged in a sedentary activity," he said. "This show on Nickelodeon is certainly a move in the right direction. From a psychological standpoint, if you can identify with the model on TV, if you can relate to it, children will emulate that person."

More than 2,500 children ages 11 to 14 around the country were interested in becoming challengers, said Marjorie Cohn, executive vice president for development and original programming at Nickelodeon.

All four of those selected have been given video cameras to keep their own video diaries.

"We've never stayed with a group of kids over such a long period," Ms. Cohn said. "We really wanted to show kids and not tell them what they should be doing."

The "Challenge" project was developed through Nickelodeon's partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, which brings together the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation, founded by the former president, himself a chubby child.

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