



## Vickie James

The director of the Healthy Kids Challenge is helping make America healthier, one school at a time.



REGISTERED DIETITIAN VICKIE JAMES motivates children to have fun being healthy—and with the help of staff at the Healthy Kids Challenge (HKC), she's giving parents, schools, and communities the tools to accomplish this goal. In 1998, long before federally mandated school wellness policies existed or childhood obesity was declared an epidemic, *Cooking Light* volunteers created the HKC initiative, then paired with James to reach more schools. Now HKC has become a self-supporting, award-winning, nonprofit organization, and more than 5,000 schools across the nation—and in England, Australia, and Japan—have signed on to “Take the Challenge.” —Amelia Farquhar

Read more about some of the healthy changes under way at schools around the country at [CookingLight.com/features](http://CookingLight.com/features).

**Q. What were the initial goals of HKC, and how has the program evolved?**

**A.** The first year, we worked with four schools to get the message to children about the importance of healthy eating and a physically active lifestyle. We discovered specific practices that worked, such as healthful lunch options and more parental involvement. We then developed a game plan for other schools to follow. It was such a success that by 2001 we had 600 schools asking us to share what we had learned, and we have never looked back.

**Q. How do you continue to spread the word?**

**A.** Sometimes it's as simple as providing activity books, workshops, or training sessions for teachers, parents, or adults who interact with kids. In other cases, we help design action plans for entire districts that make a commitment to creating a healthy school environment. Good nutrition and physical activity improve academic potential and are key strategies in providing a quality education. HKC acts as a guide—we help develop solutions for creating a culture of health in the school day and beyond—to the home and community.

**Q. Is there a key to teaching kids how to eat healthfully?**

**A.** Give kids ownership of new healthy habits. HKC has a philosophy called “Hear, See, Do.” Children learn by first hearing the message—listening to why it's important to choose healthy snacks. The next step is showing them—for example, how many tablespoons of sugar they'll consume if they have one can of soda every day for a year. Finally, and key to behavioral change, provide an opportunity to practice what they're learning—such as offering water as a healthy beverage option instead of soda. Allowing them to make a healthy decision gets them excited and helps them build skills for lifelong healthy living.

**Q. How can time-pressed families influence their children's food choices?**

**A.** Make healthy choices a family affair. Look for opportunities for time together, from meal preparation to grocery shopping, meals on the go, even table cleanup. Designate a few minutes each day to practice healthy choices together as a family. For example, talk in the car with your kids about a healthy grocery list before you go to the store.

**Q. What's the most effective technique you've found in getting kids excited about healthy eating and activity?**

Think about what excites and motivates kids. Fun, action, time with their peers, and self-esteem are all keys to encouraging healthy eating and being active.