

Tips from a hockey pro: Creating a healthy lifestyle for kids

Former NHL star Gary Roberts talks about his current role as a fitness and nutrition expert for young kids.

Apr 25, 2013 Laura Grande [0](#)



Photo: Gary Roberts

After 21 seasons playing in the NHL, Stanley Cup winner [Gary Roberts](#), 46, understands the benefits that come with a healthy lifestyle. In 2011, the busy father of three opened the [Gary Roberts High Performance Centre](#) in North York, Ont. in an attempt to mentally and physically prepare young hockey players for a potential career in the big leagues. However, it's in the field of nutrition where Roberts truly excels at educating kids — and their parents — on how to make the necessary changes that will lead to a healthier lifestyle. We chatted with the former hockey pro about energizing kids and creating positive environments in which they can excel.

Why did you decide to focus your energy on fitness and nutrition when you retired?

At 30 years old I had to (temporarily) retire for 18 months (due to a neck injury) and it was the nutrition and fitness changes in my routine afterward that helped give me the structure to play the game the way I needed to play in order to be successful. So, by using nutrition and training to revamp myself, I was able to play (in the NHL) for another 13 years. I believe the change of lifestyle gave me that chance and now I have the opportunity to pass that on to young players and hopefully help them avoid the same challenges that I had.

What makes what you offer so unique from other health and fitness coaches?

I think the thing that I can offer players is my personal experience going through the ups and downs of a 20-year NHL career. I look at myself as more of a lifestyle coach.

According to the recent survey compiled by the Allstate All-Canadians Program, only 17% of parents believe that nutrition is important to on-ice success.

Less than half of the people (who completed the survey) focused on what their child eats before and after a game — and that amazed me. Performance is all about recovery — and recovery comes through eating properly, sleeping well and doing off-ice training. If you're not doing that stuff, and you're eating salty meals that are high in fat and sugar, the chances of you performing well the next day are not good.

What would you recommend a child under the age of 15 eat before and after a game?

They have to have long-lasting carbohydrates like brown rice, quinoa or a sweet potato, along with fibre from vegetables. They should be eating lots of steamed vegetables, like broccoli or carrots. Green vegetables are outstanding for kids because they are full of iron and fibre. With all the sweating that they are doing, lean protein, like chicken or salmon, is good for them. This also can't just be once a day — they need to be refueling with proper foods every three hours to make sure they have stored energy before every game.

When should they eat before a game and how long should they wait afterward?

They should have a substantial meal about three hours before a game, then I'd suggest giving them a protein shake after the game that they can sip on while they get undressed. As for after a game, they should eat within an hour. You can have a meal in the car ready for them, like I do for my little guy. My big thing is to make sure you never leave the house without knowing where (your child's) meal is coming from. If you make a meal plan, you know you and your kids won't have to chase down fast food after the game to satisfy the hunger.

What tips would you offer parents to help their kids improve their diet?

Try grocery shopping together. I know it takes a lot of time, I can understand that. But making sure that you don't have bad foods in the house is important. If you don't have them, believe me, your kids are going to eat what's there in front of them. But I also believe you have to have something to look forward to — like an ice cream night on Saturday — but you can't make (junk food) available regularly or it becomes a habit. Start them eating healthy at a young age. My children are three, four and seven and they eat quinoa in a vegetable or meat sauce and they think it's pasta.

What kind of activities can parents do with kids at home?

Anything to do with your legs or your core. So, for example, have your child do wall-sits while watching TV. Or have them do planks during commercials for 30 seconds. Little exercises like this help to build strength in their legs and their core, which are the biggest areas you can work on. Also, take their phones away (*laughs*). Give them time for those (technology) activities, but then get them to put it down and enjoy the outdoors. I understand technology is a benefit to us all, but I look at my four-year-old and sometimes I have to steal the iPad from him.

Knowing what you know now about health and fitness, would have you have done anything differently during your years in the NHL?

Early on in my career I had personal success, and I was fortunate. But I didn't eat properly or rest properly the first eight years of my NHL career. I still worked hard and took part in off-ice training but I wasn't getting the

full benefit because my nutrition sucked. My career ended because, at 180 pounds, my body couldn't play the way I needed it to play in order to be successful. I started breaking down because I wasn't paying attention to these things. If you want to be an elite athlete and you want to have a chance at longevity, you have to buy into the whole program (of healthy living).

What would you say to parents who have kids who want to excel in sports?

We, as parents, demand so much from our kids. We are giving these kids great opportunities to play (sports), but make sure they are fueled properly so they can do all the things you are asking them to do. If you're wondering why "Johnny" doesn't have any energy in the third period, it's probably because he's not eating properly. I look at guys like (current NHL star) Jeff Skinner as a positive example (for kids). At 14 years old he started training right and eating properly. It takes time and I recommend taking small strides. It's really up to the parents to become more educated, which is what the AllState All-Canadians Program tries to do. We offer a health and nutrition seminar (and online tips) for parents because they are the ones who have to make the change in order for their child to benefit.