

Meet The Entrepreneur Aiming To Change Kiwi Health Habits From A Young Age

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By Guest Writer

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A career spent in personal training taught guest writer Kim Harvey that healthy habits are hard to teach in adults, as learned behaviour isn't easy to change. Her solution? Start teaching the younger generation tools to manage their health and change the future prospects of Aotearoa. Kim has single-handedly built a successful not-for-profit virtual health program that reaches 20,000 Kiwi kids every year – but this ambitious woman is not stopping there.

After spending five years as a personal trainer my eyes were wide open to the challenges adults face trying to develop healthy habits. Even with major physical issues drastically impacting their quality of life, small changes often seemed too difficult to stick with for my clients. In all honesty, it felt like my efforts were hopeless.

Still, with a rapid increase in lifestyle-related health problems like diabetes across New Zealand, I knew there must be a better way. Knowing first-hand how tough it is to change grown-up's behaviour, I turned my focus to kids – research shows the habits we learn in the first 10 years of life are absolutely crucial for setting life-long attitudes and behaviours.

With a heavy dose of naïve optimism, I threw the towel in on a steady income and set out to create a better world for our kids, one where our country puts in the hard work and funding to prevent ill health – rather than struggling and failing to treat the resulting health disaster.

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Changing the status quo is never easy. I quickly learnt that no one wants to pay for something now when the results will only be seen in decades to come. Poor health, diet and sedentary lifestyles have become endemic in New Zealand society and while we're happy to decry it whenever a ghastly headline pops up, all the talking and tutting in the world never actually changes anything.

I knew I had the perfect solution for our increasingly digital world, designed to get our screen-addicted kids moving, thinking about what they put in their mouths and feeling the rewards in their own bodies. But I just kept hitting brick walls and very limited funding options – nothing coming close to being able to deliver my vision at scale.

Then it hit me, why not go where the money is? I started Azion Wellness, which became one of New Zealand's largest corporate health and wellbeing companies, with the ultimate goal of building the business large enough to fund the kids' program. Azion was a bit of a pioneer in its time, with most big companies saying 'corporate wellbeing what?!' – it certainly prepared me for the later rejection I was going to face.

Still, as is often the way, it took proven offshore success to make inroads at home in Aotearoa. I brought corporate wellness to the larger Australian market via contracts with health insurers Bupa and Medibank, from there the New South Wales Ministry of Health took notice and asked me if we could adapt the program into a pilot with primary schools – it felt like all my dreams were coming true!

The pilot program was a hit, evaluated by the University of Sydney with the recommendation that it be run state-wide. Now the only challenge left was to get Kiwis to take note.

It's hard to look back now and remember what returning home was like; buoyed by international success, I felt like I couldn't lose. But very quickly, reality crashed back in and it was a three-year fight to run New Zealand's first Virtual Adventure. Through each rejection, closed-door and knockback – and there were plenty from both public and private sectors – I had to pick myself up and try again but how could I give in with so many kids struggling?

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Today the program is a hit, self-funded by committed and aligned sponsors and backed by well-known Kiwis such as Ardie Savea and Amelíaranne Ekenasio, but the demand far outweighs the number of places we can offer, even in 2020 when extra learning (and more computer time) often felt like the last thing our amazing teachers needed. Each year 20,000 kids take part in the Zespri Young and Healthy Virtual Adventure and, thanks to support from key sponsors like Zespri and ASICS, it is completely free for schools to sign up and take part.

When the program is active, I receive stories from kids daily who are trying new activities, getting their families out walking, choosing to drink water instead of sugary drinks and saying no to junk food. You wouldn't believe how many Kiwi kids hadn't tried kiwifruit until Zespri stopped by with a box.

My work is far from finished – I want to open the program to 100,000 children every year, I want every Kiwi kid to have the opportunity at least three times during primary school and I want to see the benefits continue to ripple outward throughout their whānau and the wider community. Imagine what we could achieve as a country without so much money going to 'ambulances at the bottom of the cliff' solutions?

I know there will be many closed doors ahead but I'm never going to give up – people do care and we owe it to the next generation to build a better, healthier world.



ZESPRI GIVE ASICS SHOES TO KIDS AT RATA ST SCHOOL, NAENAE. PHOTO COPYRIGHT MARK COOTE

Kim Harvey is the founder of The Young and Healthy Trust and runs the annual Zespri Young and Healthy Virtual Adventure in schools across New Zealand. There is still time for your child's class to sign up for the 2021 adventure at www.youngandhealthy.org.nz, so please chat to their teacher – last year kids cut their junk food intake in half!