



Programs for Children and Youth

While young people are more at risk than ever before for obesity, diabetes, and the accompanying health problems, the opportunities for them to make healthy choices have also diminished. Many of the school and community programs that used to support children's health, such as daily physical education, are often no longer available. What adds to the problem is the lure of sedentary pursuits, such as television and video games, and the availability of high-calorie, low-nutrition foods in competition with nutritious school lunches. Through community, school, and business-based partners, we need to offer programs for this age group that will keep them interested in physical activity and promote good nutrition.

RATIONALE

Young people build healthy bodies and establish healthy lifestyles by being physically ac-

tive and eating healthily in their daily lives. However, few young people meet recommendations for good health; a minority is physically active on a regular basis; and both physical activity and dietary quality decline in adolescence.

Two periods of life have been identified as strategic in the development of childhood obesity. First, during the prenatal period, excess maternal weight gain, gestational diabetes, and high birth weight are factors that raise the risk of obesity later in life. Second, being at risk or overweight in adolescence has a very high risk of persisting into adulthood.

Recommended family strategies include increasing the duration of breastfeeding, controlling television time, and restoring balance to the parent-child feeding relationship. Maternal, child, and adolescent programs such as Head Start, WIC, and school-based programs have the opportunity to target more intensive

dietary guidance and physical activity guidance to parents, caretakers, and young people.

At the same time that obesity rates rise, the number of students enrolled in daily school-based and school-linked programs to develop lifelong physical activity patterns is decreasing. From 1991 to 1995, participation in daily physical education programs in high schools dropped from 42% to 25%. School reform initiatives that focus exclusively on academics have squeezed time from school days formerly reserved for physical education programs. Computers, video games, cable television, and other more sedentary pursuits compete for the leisure time of young people. Food environments have an abundance of foods high in fat and sugar with limited healthier food options. Many schools offer competitive or à la carte foods as alternatives to nutritious school lunches, thereby encouraging unhealthy eating habits. Competitive foods such as soft drinks, chips, candy, and fast-food courts in schools that contribute to the lack of healthy choices for students are driven in many school districts by the need for revenues realized through these high-margin offerings.

Recommended intervention sites include the following:

- Within families and in community settings, opportunities for physical activity can be increased through walking, bicycling, and other forms of recreation and free play. This intervention may include providing more recreational equipment and adult supervision for after-school, weekend, and summer competitive and recreational activity or improving walking and biking routes between residential areas and schools.

- Schools (preschools, child care, K-12) should offer daily physical activity of sufficient duration and intensity for all children, provide healthier foods, and reduce or eliminate competitive foods of minimum or low-nutrient value that are sold on campus. If competitive foods are offered, then they should represent choices from the five major food groups of the food guide.

- In medical settings, pediatricians and other providers can promote healthy nutrition and physical activity habits.

- Worksites can help parents to be more active and, in turn, encourage more physical activity among family members.

- Community-wide mass media targeted to children and adolescents can deliver important messages about healthful eating and regular physical activity.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

1. Provide regular opportunities for all children and youth to engage in physical activity and healthy eating behaviors, as well as to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for lifelong engagement in these behaviors.

2. Work with preschool and child care partners to strengthen policies that ensure adequate physical activity and healthy food choices.

3. Help underwrite school-centered programs and campaigns at four developmental levels: lower elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school.

4. Encourage community initiatives with youth organizations, businesses, and programs after school and during the summer.

5. Collaborate with media and advertising industries to promote more positive advertising to children and youth.

6. Promote a continuum of physical activity from early childhood through adolescence that is sequential and developmentally appropriate.

7. Improve promotion of healthy eating and physical activity in primary care settings, including adoption of anticipatory prevention guidance and breast-feeding promotion strategies and guidelines.

8. Create intermediary linkages, including teacher and staff incentives and training.

9. Set school policy and standards that reflect national health objectives for nutrition and physical activity.

Sample Practices and Programs

CATCH (Coordinated Approach to School Health)—a multilevel, multicomponent intervention to promote a healthy school environment as well as improve healthy eating behaviors and physical activity levels for students in grades K-5. Positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors have been reported from trials and have been sustained during the three-year period of involvement in the pro-

gram. Lesson plans, workbooks, and videos are available. **Contact:** Guy Parcell, 713-792-8547.

SPARK—This is a physical education curriculum and staff development program for students in grades K-6. Students from third grade to sixth grade are engaged in a self-management curriculum that includes in-school and family participation. A SPARK staff member trains teachers through workshops and follow-up consultations. Improvements in levels of physical performance were observed for SPARK students compared with controls for a period of two years after intervention. Materials include a set of physical education and self-management textbooks. **Contact:** 800-SPARK PE, www.foundation.sdsu.edu/projects/spark/index.html.

Planet Health—The Harvard Prevention Research Center created this curriculum that integrates health messages into physical activity sessions and lessons in social studies, science, language arts, and math. The curriculum has been piloted in Boston public schools. **Contact:** Jean Wiecha,

jwiecha@hsph.harvard.edu, 617-432-4255.

San Luis Valley Community Coalition—This Colorado project brings schools, community resources, and three generations of family members together to build a school environment that supports healthful eating and physical activity. Components of the program are parent volunteers for lunchtime sessions on healthy eating, training Boys and Girls Club mentors for diet and activity, and training lay health facilitators to visit with families. **Contact:** Julie Marshall, julie.marshall@uhsc.edu, 303-315-7596.

A World Fit for Kids—This program was developed in a violent Los Angeles neighborhood. It engages youth to become mentor coaches, and with the help of program coordinators, they then engage elementary through high school youth in fitness activities to build self-esteem, teach conflict resolution, and foster leadership skills. The program champion and role model is Kevin Sorbo, star of the *Hercules* television show. He stimulates the formation of coalitions to gain volunteers for the program. **Contact:** A World Fit for Kids, www.worldfitforkids.org/aafsorbo.html, 213-387-7712.

Project Fit America—This program aims to increase awareness of the benefits of regular physical activity at the elementary school level and to enhance overall health and well-being. The project provides comprehensive fitness equipment, educational in-services for teachers, and a curriculum guide for classroom lessons. Local businesses are engaged to provide the equipment for the project, and volunteers are recruited to supplement the staff. Children participating in the project show marked increases in fitness. **Contact:** Project Fit America, www.projectfitamerica.org.

Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment, A Guide to Local Action—This is toolkit developed by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service to help communities promote healthy school nutrition. It features a guide that offers practical advice on taking local action to improve school nutrition as well as background materials explaining the importance of healthy eating to children's long-term health and well-being. The kit also includes handouts, sample materials, a video, and a PowerPoint presentation. **Contact:** www.fns.usda.gov.

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