

COMBATING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS, THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL AND THE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS INITIATIVE: A CASE STUDY

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Among the millions of children and young people in our communities, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles cause serious health issues, lower self-esteem, lead to social and psychological problems and contribute to poor academic performance. Overweight is the most common health problem facing children today, and it has reached epidemic proportions. It ranks as the #1 concern for children in the United States, ahead of drugs, alcohol and gangs, and is the focus of First Lady Michelle Obama's recently announced *Let's Move!* campaign.

Although childhood obesity crosses all socioeconomic lines, children living in poverty are disproportionately affected. It is all too common for families with limited financial resources to sacrifice the quality of food for quantity and to consume large amounts of food when it is available to compensate for times when it is not. Easy access to high concentrations of fast food chains and corner markets compounds the problem. And, unsafe neighborhoods make it difficult, if not impossible, for children to get the exercise they need to be healthy. All of this contributes to the likelihood that they will become overweight.

If these patterns continue into adulthood, one in every three children born in 2000 and one in every two children of color is likely to develop type 2 diabetes in his or her lifetime. This, and other medical issues, will lead to an unprecedented rate of premature death and disability, diminished workplace productivity and staggering financial repercussions for families, insurers, healthcare providers and our society.

As devastating as this is, we know that children who develop healthy eating habits and are physically active at an early age are much more likely to be well and stay well. We also know that barriers to this happening are shared among the community as a whole – and that when these barriers are lowered or removed changes in individual behavior become more achievable and sustainable. The socio-ecological model makes a compelling case that the most effective route to healthy behaviors comes through a combination of efforts at all levels – individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and public policy.

There is a growing body of evidence that comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to be a driving force in this effort.

Through a combination of federal, state and local funding, these programs already reach more than a million low-income children in California and many more across the nation. Building on this platform makes sense. It can be done at minimal cost to taxpayers and pay huge dividends.

Comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to combat childhood obesity in ways that are fiscally prudent, socially responsible and politically appealing.

California's Healthy Behaviors Initiative offers a prime example of how this happen. Funded by the Network for a Healthy California (a division of the California Department of Public Health), the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and The California Endowment, the Center for Collaborative Solutions has spent the last five years developing exemplary practices in nutrition and physical activity, vetting them with experts and field testing them in 10 multi-site afterschool programs serving over 100,000 elementary and middle school students. Located in inner cities,

metropolitan areas and rural communities throughout the state, these programs are now regional Learning Centers and provide support to many other programs. One of these Centers is included in this case study. This program offers examples of the approaches that are being used. The changes that are taking place in children's eating habits and physical fitness levels and the impact that this is capable of having throughout the United States.

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A WORLD FIT FOR KIDS! Inner City, Los Angeles

Over the past 16 years, A World Fit for Kids! (WFIT) has provided health-enhancing opportunities for more than 150,000 children and young people in some of the most economically challenged inner city neighborhoods in Los Angeles. With the elimination of nutrition and physical education in many schools, the program has filled the gap by taking a strategic approach that is changing students' eating habits, improving their physical fitness levels and surrounding them with positive environmental support systems.

Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors

Like most high quality afterschool programs, WFIT offers a wide variety of academic and enrichment activities that are exciting, engaging and appropriately challenging to students. What distinguishes this program is its powerful vision and high level of intentionality. Each program component is designed with a specific purpose in mind: helping youngsters become healthy, fit and ready to learn. 93% of the students enrolled attend the program three hours a day, five days a week and, unlike many afterschool programs, staff retention is exceptionally high.

Children regularly participate in nutrition education classes and learn about the Food Pyramid and the importance of healthy eating habits. They apply what they learn in cooking classes, where they have access to mobile kitchens and develop healthy recipes. They visit local grocery stores and learn how to read labels and comparison shop for the highest nutritional quality and best prices. They take field trips to farmers' markets and try new fruits and vegetables. And, they set personal nutrition goals and record their progress in daily journals. These experiences reinforce what children are learning and make it easier for them to make better choices about the foods they eat and the beverages they drink. As evidenced in recent evaluations, the level of intentionality demonstrated in this program is paying off:

- Soft drink consumption has dramatically declined. The number of students who regularly drank three or more sodas a day fell to just 3%.
- Close to 3/4 of those attending reported drinking water three or more times a day during the spring of 2009, compared with 60% in the fall of 2008.
- Youngsters increasingly chose fruits and vegetables over chips and fast food, with the majority reporting an increase in their preference for healthy foods.

WFIT approaches its efforts to improve youngsters' physical fitness with the same intentionality. Students engage in at least 40 minutes of moderate to strenuous physical activity every day in a variety of traditional and nontraditional sports, dance classes, circuit training, rock wall climbing, exercises and yoga. They are given pedometers and trained in how to track their fun, formal and functional walking both in the program and at home. And, they learn how to monitor their heart

rates. Although California only mandates physical fitness testing for 5th, 7th and 9th grade students, WFIT monitors student progress from the 4th grade through the 12th grade. The results are well-documented and impressive.

- Close to 80% of all students reported that the program helped them become more physically active.
- 60% of all 5th grade students passed the state mandated Fitnessgram test (which sets standards in aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, trunk extensor strength, upper body strength and flexibility) during the 2008-2009 school year, as compared to 51% in 2007-2008 and 36 percent in 2006-2007.
- Students who were in the healthy fitness zone for abdominal strength in the fall of 2008 increased from 28% to 74% in the spring of 2009.
- 8 out of 10 children increased the number of PACER laps they were able to complete and decreased the time it took them to run a mile by at least one full minute.
- Half of all students lowered their Body Mass Index, with overweight children losing an average of five pounds.

WFIT's approach not only improves children's health and well-being, it has an added bonus that directly contributes to their success in school. Students were absent less often and their academic performance improved more than expected. Those who regularly attended the program raised their standardized test scores in math and eight out of ten reported improvement in their grades.

High school students who worked in the program were more likely to pass the math exit exam test (CAHSEE) than their peers and 94% who participated in the Teen Fit for SuccessSM training and internship program graduated from high school, primarily from a high school with a 49.5% graduation rate. In recognition of the difference it is making, WFIT received the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Gold Medal Award, presented by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships

Beyond the opportunities WFIT provides for individual students, the program recognizes the importance of surrounding children with positive role models. The leadership team makes sure that job applicants are aware of the program's commitment to everyone's health and well-being, its zero tolerance policy for unhealthy food on its campuses and its determination to help children overcome the challenges they face. Only those candidates who enthusiastically support the program's goals and policies are hired.

The program's approach to staff development reflects the same values. Each staff member participates in ongoing nutrition and physical activity training and is familiar with the exemplary practices developed in the Healthy Behaviors Initiative. The Nutrition Director, a full-time member of the leadership team, trains staff in California's Health Framework and Health Education Content Standards to be certain that they have an appropriate knowledge base for the activities they offer and the approaches they take when working with children. Goals are set, weekly action plans are developed and progress is measured quarterly.

Coaches (those working directly with youngsters) who oversee physical activities receive intensive and ongoing training delivered through *Mentors in MotionSM*, helping them gain new insights and perspectives about planning and facilitating quality physical activity sessions for

students. The approach integrates opportunities for self-empowerment, leadership and experiential learning and creates powerful results for students and the teens and adults who work with them. Every staff member has access to program-wide and site-based coaching to ensure that they are able to transfer what they learn into real-life settings. And, they have the opportunity to work with experts to develop personal nutrition and fitness plans of their own.

To improve their own health and well-being, staff members are given stipends to offset the cost of joining health and fitness clubs, and each employee has the opportunity to work with a personal fitness trainer and nutrition counselor.

As WFIT has become more intentional about surrounding students with positive interpersonal influences during the afterschool hours, the staff has also become more sensitive to the issues children face at home. They are keenly aware of the importance of parents as partners in children's efforts to become healthier. Families participate in nutrition education classes and are encouraged to become more physically active. Parent newsletters are sent home periodically, and include sections on nutrition (including recipes for preparing healthy meals) and physical activity.

In addition, families are made aware of a variety of resources, including the Food Stamp Program and local food banks – a critical factor in improving their food security (having enough to eat). As a result, they report that they are making better choices about the meals they cook at home. They are preparing meals in healthier ways. And, they are acquiring the knowledge they need to select healthy foods and beverages that are within their budgets.

Promoting Positive Organizational Environments

Positive relationships with certificated and classified staff, including food service managers and parent outreach directors, have made it possible to create and sustain healthier school environments.

WFIT recognizes the importance of developing authentic partnerships with schools. A number of program coaches are instructional assistants during the school day. In one case, a Physical Education teacher is also the primary physical activity coach/trainer for the afterschool staff. This ensures alignment between WFIT and the schools where its programs are located and positions the program to influence school policies and environments.

Through WFIT's outreach strategies, more students are taking advantage of the school-based free and reduced price breakfast and lunch programs. The messages they are receiving before, during and afterschool are increasingly consistent. And largely through the leadership team's efforts, schools that had fallen behind on their timetables have moved forward at a faster rate in implementing their Wellness Plans and including afterschool programs in their strategies.

Promoting Positive Community Environments

WFIT goes beyond the role most afterschool programs play by collaborating with schools and community agencies to coordinate efforts to bring about change. The program recognizes that what happens just beyond the immediate campus is part of the environment that either supports or detracts from what it is trying to accomplish. Until recently, vendors selling candy, chips, ice cream and sodas positioned their carts outside entrances 15 minutes before the end of the school day. By working in partnership with principals, the staff has been successful in enforcing

local ordinances that prohibit vendors from being closer than 300 feet from schools. While this hasn't eliminated the problem, it has greatly reduced it.

Working with a variety of local organizations to maximize the use of available resources has also become a high priority. The Salvation Army Los Angeles Red Shield Youth and Community Center offers access to its recreational facilities for trainings and encourages staff, students and families who live in the vicinity to take advantage of the opportunity for evening and weekend physical activity at little or no cost. Through a partnership with the local Food Bank, children have access to more fruits and vegetables during the program and their parents are taking advantage of this service as well.

Connecting students with professional sports teams has also played an important role in reinforcing the importance of being physical fit and nutritionally smart. The Clippers (basketball), Kings (ice hockey), Dodgers (baseball), Sparks (women's basketball), Riptide (Lacrosse) and the University of Southern California Athletic Department donate tickets to professional sports events and provide equipment. Both Nike and Under Armour provide support.

Support from professional sports teams and high profile corporations reinforces the importance of physical activity.

Promoting Positive Policy Changes

WFIT's Executive Director, Normandie Nigh, is a nationally recognized expert in physical fitness and afterschool program development and an international speaker and trainer. She has been the Executive Director of the program since 1994. She serves on numerous local, state and national advisory boards and regularly advocates for changes in public policy that remove barriers and support healthy life-styles, both in Sacramento and Washington, DC. And, in addition to briefing Congress Members and Senators, she recently participated in a White House Executive Staff meeting advocating for changes in federal policy.

National and international television personality Kevin Sorbo is the program's national spokesperson and a leading advocate for children's health and well-being.

As part of its teen outreach program, a former WFIT student appeared before the Institute of Medicine's Standing Committee on Childhood Obesity Prevention. And, MTV will soon be airing a documentary focusing on combating the childhood obesity crisis and highlighting the exceptional work the program is doing, bringing greater attention to the issue, raising its visibility and making it real to decision makers at all levels.

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CONCLUSION

The impact that WFIT programs are having on children's lives provides strong evidence that comprehensive afterschool programs are well-positioned to become part of the urgently needed solution to the childhood obesity crisis. In California alone, nearly \$1 billion in annual funding is available through the state's *After School Education and Safety Programs*, federal 21st

***"With data showing us that every \$1 spent on prevention strategies yields us a savings of more than \$5 in healthcare costs, we have no choice but to direct our limited dollars into programs that work."
—Tom Harkin, Chairman, U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee.***

Century Community Learning Centers dollars and local investments. More than \$3.4 billion has already been funded nationally, with programs operating in every state. The platform for reaching millions of children and influencing their eating patterns and physical activity levels clearly exists.

Building on this is smart – and cost-effective. As WFIT’s role in the Healthy Behaviors Initiative has demonstrated, a lot can be done at very little additional expense. By capitalizing on practices that have already been developed and adopting approaches that have already proven to lead to positive results, the return on investments is likely to exceed 1,000 percent or more. The key, as these programs and the others in this Initiative have shown, is approach this work with a strong sense of purpose and a high level of intentionality. Children can’t wait, and neither can we!

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The Healthy Behaviors Initiative is funded by the generous support of the Network for a Healthy California, The California Endowment and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Additional publications made possible through this Initiative include: *Taking Advantage of an Unprecedented Opportunity: Afterschool Programs and the Childhood Obesity Crisis* and *Changing Lives, Saving Lives: A Guide to Improving Children’s Eating Habits, Physical Activity and Food Security in Afterschool Programs*.

For more information about California’s Healthy Behaviors Initiative, please contact the Center for Collaborative Solutions at 916-567-9914 or visit its website at www.afterschoolsolutions.org