

Health Policy Research Program Summary of Research Results

Title:	Best Practices for the Prevention of Overweight and Obesity in Children: A Focus on Immigrants New to Industrialized Countries
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Institution:	Calgary Health Region
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Summary

The Problem

Obesity leads to chronic disease and poor health. Unfortunately, childhood obesity is rising at an alarming rate in Canada as well as in other countries worldwide. There is general agreement that the most effective way of curbing the epidemic is to prevent obesity. Promoting and protecting the health of children and youth requires everyone's help. Communities, schools and families need assistance to help children and youth practice healthy behaviors.

What We Did

This synthesis research initiative gathered information about the best way to prevent and treat obesity in children. Information about prevention and intervention programs was gathered from a variety of sources including the library, searching the internet, and talking to researchers and experts in the areas of child health, immigrant health, public health, psychology, nutrition, exercise, and health policy.

What We Learned

We can take action!

- Programs in schools and clinics were helpful in reducing chronic disease risk factor levels (blood fat, blood pressure), reducing body fat, and improving fitness.

- Participating in physical activity is an important factor in reducing and preventing obesity.
- Involving program participants in the development of programs is important to building acceptance by children, families and communities.
- Obesity intervention programs did not cause harm or stigmatization to participants.
- Successful programs used many elements such as health education, physical activity, family support, behavior modification, improving access to healthy food choices and exercise in schools, and rewards/incentives (water bottles, T-shirts, money).
- Programs need to be evaluated to determine if the health gains made can be sustained over the long-term.

There are some groups we don't know much about!

- Very few initiatives have focused on preschool children - yet this is an important time for prevention.
- Very few programs targeted boys, and, more information was available about programs directed at girls than boys.
- Virtually no programs or research has been undertaken to understand how obesity develops among immigrant populations.
- Few programs were offered in community or home settings limiting our understanding of the effectiveness of this environment for interventions.

There are some areas we need to learn more about!

- Does modifying the environment (school food choices, water coolers, school walking clubs, etc.) improve health behaviors and prevent obesity?
- How do we build comprehensive programs that address the common elements of healthy eating, active living, and mental well-being so that the risk of many diseases can be tackled simultaneously?
- What policies and community wide strategies are effective to prevent obesity?
- What are the most effective program components for different groups of children (age ranges, gender, ethnicity) and where are they most effectively situated (schools, community centres, libraries)?

What improvements can we make?

- Build better research designs and processes to understand program effectiveness.
- Use common indicators for program evaluation to allow for better comparison of program outcomes.
- Build program evaluations that follow the participants for more than a year to improve our understanding of what works best.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO IN FUTURE!

For All

- Encourage action now.
- Advocate for school policies and programs that incorporate what we know works.
- Advocate for programs with a public health emphasis.

For Program Funders

- Develop more comprehensive programs that address obesity and related chronic diseases.
- Encourage programs to build on the experience of interventions which are successful.
- Create multi year funding for programs to allow for sufficient time to gather evidence of program effectiveness.

For Research and Evaluation Funders

- Create better indicators and measurement systems to be able to compare across programs.
- Develop programs or research initiatives to address the gaps in programming (young children, gender-specific, settings, immigrants).

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In addition to the above summary, the full report can be accessed in the following ways:

- A print version of the full report in the language of submission can be borrowed from the Departmental Library; requests may be sent to HCLibrary_BibliothequeSC@hc-sc.gc.ca.
- An electronic version of the full report in the language of submission is available upon request from Health Canada by contacting the Research Management and Dissemination Division.

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