

Researchers say after-school programs should promote activity, healthy nutrition

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Children's after-school activities often consist of sedentary behavior such as watching television, but after-school programs that offer physical activity and healthy snacks could be the best place for children's health.

David Dzewaltowski, head of the department of kinesiology at Kansas State University, and other K-State researchers have found that quality after-school programs are an important contributor to children's [physical activity](#).

"Participation in after-school programs tends to drop with increasing age as parents believe their children can be at home without adult supervision," Dzewaltowski said. "Parents should strive to place their children in healthy environments that are supervised by adults and that provide physical activity and healthful food options."

The researchers conducted the Healthy Opportunities for Physical Activity and Nutrition, or HOP'N, After-School Project, which was designed to prevent obesity by enhancing the quality of after-school programming. The study found that some existing after-school programs lack in quality and do not provide adequate nutrition or physical activity, especially for different genders and fitness levels.

The HOP'N After-School Project includes four elements: a daily healthy snack, daily physical activity, weekly nutrition and physical activity education sessions. It also provides continuous staff training.

Eight elementary schools and after-school programs in Lawrence participated in the K-State study during a three-year period. The after-school settings were observed throughout the school year. Participating children have their height and weight measured in the fall and spring. Children also wore pedometer devices to measure their physical activity. After a baseline year, the HOP'N program was implemented at four of the sites for two years, and the other sites continued their regular programming as a project control.

Baseline findings of the study showed that, on average, the after-school programs provided 20 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, which fulfills one-third of the recommended 60-minute daily physical activity for youth. However, the researchers found that the students spent the majority of their time participating in sedentary and light-intensity activities.

For two subsequent program years, the HOP'N program staff trained after-school program leaders to increase physical activity in their programs. Results showed that program leaders could modify the existing activities to include more moderate-to-vigorous physical activity throughout the session.

The findings showed that boys were significantly more active than girls during indoor free play and organized outdoor activities; however, moderate activity levels for both genders were similar. This shows that the girls had lower participation in vigorous-intensity physical activity.

Dzewaltowski said after-school programs can better cater to the interests of genders and provide various activity choices, which could increase physical activity levels, self-efficacy and enjoyment of physical activity.

The results also showed that overweight students were substantially less active than the students who were not overweight during organized

outdoor activities, which might be related to differences in aerobic fitness. Dzewaltowski said future research should include understanding the activity preferences of overweight children.

During the baseline year, the researchers also found that there was a significant difference in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity levels recorded during the free play and organized physical activity sessions. Children were more active in free play than when led by adults who were not well trained to promote physical activity.

"After-school program leaders who attempt to provide physical activity through structured games may do more harm than good," Dzewaltowski said. "Leaders should encourage children's natural inclination to move and play to promote physical activity in the after-school time period if there is not opportunity for training to be an effective physical activity leader."

Dzewaltowski said it is important for children in middle school to learn healthy lifestyle behaviors, and the after-school setting is an effective place for obesity prevention. Since many schools do not provide opportunities for physical activity during the school day, the after-school hours provide an opportunity for children to be active without having to change the structure of the school day.

The baseline findings of the study have been published in numerous publications, including in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, *Nutrition Reviews* and *Journal of School Health*. Preliminary outcomes were presented at the 2009 American College of Sports Medicine annual meeting in Seattle, Wash. The study was supported by a National Research Initiative Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service Human Nutrition and Obesity Program.

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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