

# Improving a child's chance to grow up healthy

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Byrd-Bredbenner and Worobey suggest that families should dine together often, that they should eat healthy food, and that the experience should be pleasant and positive.

If you change the way you run your household, can you keep your child from becoming obese? Two Rutgers nutrition researchers believe that's possible, and they'll spend the next five years trying to prove it with the help of 600 families in New Jersey and Arizona, and a \$4.5 million grant from the United States Department of Agriculture.

“We’re creating an intervention to help parents re-shape their households so their kids have a better chance of growing up healthy,” said Carol Byrd-Bredbenner, an extension specialist with Rutgers’ New Jersey Agriculture Experiment Station.

In their past research, Byrd-Bredbenner and John Worobey, a professor

of nutritional sciences in the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, surveyed and observed hundreds of mothers and their young children to understand how those mothers buy, prepare, and serve food. They've evaluated inventories in hundreds of homes to find out the nutrient value of the food in those homes. Finally, they conducted a small-scale "kitchen organization/food management makeover," which convinced them that teaching adults to make health-oriented changes in the way they buy, prepare, and consume food can have a positive effect on the health of their children.

Byrd-Bredbenner, the author of numerous nutrition books, including *Fresh Tastes from the Garden State* (Rutgers University Press), studies how food is labeled, served, advertised, imagined, and handled and investigates the impact on diet and health. She also recommends ways to improve both, recently directing two major social marketing campaigns: *Ask Before You Eat/Know Before You Serve*, a food allergy campaign targeted at restaurateurs, school nurses, and parents, and *Food Safety for Young Adults*.

Worobey, who has published extensively on the link between [nutrition](#) and behavior, studies connections between the environment of infants and their subsequent risk of obesity. "My work tells me that you can never start too early," Worobey said. "As early as infancy, we see signs that a baby may be on the road to being overweight."

That something needs to be done to combat childhood obesity – particularly in New Jersey – is not in doubt. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, the obesity rate for pre-school children (ages 2 to 5) in New Jersey is 17.9 percent, the second highest rate in the nation. The national rate is 12 percent, with an additional 16 percent at risk of becoming overweight. The problem is particularly serious for poor and minority children. Byrd-Bredbenner and Worobey have written that about half the African-American and Hispanic children attending

the Head Start program in New Brunswick are either obese or at risk of becoming overweight.

The new project will involve 600 low-income households, 300 each in New Jersey and Arizona. Nobuko Hongu, a researcher at the University of Arizona and a former student of Worobey's, will conduct the study in Arizona.

Half the families – some in Arizona, some in New Jersey; some in person, some online – will receive eight, 15-minute lessons on how to make healthy changes in their home environments. Each lesson will deal with some aspect of diet, physical activity, sleep or childcare. The parents and children in these families will be measured for height, weight and body-mass index at the beginning of the study, six months into the study, and then at the end of the study. Half the families will constitute a control group, and will not receive their lessons until after they've completed the measurements. Worobey, Byrd-Bredbenner and Hongu will spend the next year creating all the materials.

The content of the lessons for parents is straightforward: Encourage your children to eat more fruit and vegetables; drink more reduced-fat milk and fruit juice and less soda; encourage kids to eat cereal for breakfast; and serve everything in appropriate portions. Eat together as a family, and don't fight at the table. Limit all screen time – television, video games, computers – and maximize physical activity. Make sure that children get enough sleep, and try to get your childcare provider to back you up on all these initiatives.

Byrd-Bredbenner and Worobey said their discussions with parents will be positive and nonjudgmental, and that they will suggest that parents adopt a similar stance with their children. "You want to encourage your kid to eat his veggies, not say, 'Eat your veggies, or no dessert,'" Worobey said.

Provided by Rutgers University

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