

A true challenge for any superhero: Can comic books combat childhood obesity?

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The newest superhero nemesis isn't the Joker or Kryptonite or the Red Skull. With a little knowledge, the latest superhero weapons can be much easier to develop than X-ray vision or flying faster than a speeding bullet. Positive results are emerging from a University of Cincinnati research project aimed at curbing childhood obesity.

The project was the doctoral research of Paul Branscum, who recently completed his PhD in health education from the UC College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services (CECH).

The project challenged 71 third, fourth and fifth-grade students to create their own [comic books](#) with healthy messages in mind. Branscum says early results indicate that the children were adopting those healthy behaviors.

Students were inspired to think of real and fictional characters as they wrote their stories, plus, they were encouraged to blend the following four healthy behaviors into their creations as well as their lifestyles:

- Participate in at least one hour of daily physical activity.
- Consume five daily servings of [fruits and vegetables](#).
- Consume sugar-free drinks and water instead of sugar-sweetened drinks.
- Participate in no more than two hours of screen time per day – including TV, the Internet and video games.

The study was conducted over a three-month period. Children were enrolled in 12 Columbus, Ohio, area YMCA sponsored after-school programs. The gender breakdown of the group was about even.

Branscum says the children's Body Mass Index (BMI) remained about the same following the project. However, he says three behaviors – consuming more fruits and vegetables, physical activity and consuming water and sugar-free drinks – "increased significantly throughout the program."

Furthermore, Branscum says the children reported increased confidence (or self-efficacy) in their ability to select health-related behaviors.

"Comic books can do a lot of neat things," Branscum says. "One of the things that I like about them is that they can explain complicated issues in a way that people can understand, by combining words and pictures."

In the past, Branscum says that popular comic books have carried kid-friendly messages about choosing healthy behaviors, but the effects of those campaigns have been difficult to measure.

Branscum says he is now interested in pursuing a larger grant and teaming up with a major comic book company, such as Marvel or DC Comics, to create a comic book line geared toward promoting healthy behaviors. "This was a brief intervention program, so I really want to expand it and also get parents on board," Branscum says.

Like the job of a superhero, the battle against childhood obesity is of utmost national importance. National figures indicate [childhood obesity](#) has more than tripled over the past 30 years. "We used to call type two diabetes 'adult onset diabetes,' but we don't call it that anymore, because we're seeing it develop more with children and adolescents," Branscum says. "If current obesity rates continue to grow, we're going to see a

country that's reporting nearly 100 percent obesity in another 40 years – it's mind boggling."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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