

Research aims to prevent obesity by reaching parents, young children through child care

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A Kansas State University research group is jumping ahead to improve nutrition and physical activity among young children and prevent childhood obesity.

The researchers -- led by David Dzewaltowski, professor and kinesiology department head -- have developed a program called HOP'N Home, which stands for Healthy Opportunities for [Physical Activity](#) and Nutrition at Home. The researchers have been working on [obesity prevention](#) for more than 15 years. The latest segment of the program partners with the Butler County Health Department and K-State Research and Extension to reach 3- to 5-year-olds and their parents through activities conducted at child care facilities.

"Our research has moved to younger and younger age groups because we have found through the public health literature and surveillance that you need to start as young as possible," Dzewaltowski said.

The project works with child care centers to build the capacity of staff to help children and their parents offer more physical activity and more nutritious [food options](#) as well as understand the impact of advertising on their food and physical activity choices. The project has been supported by the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund.

The project is divided into four phases. The first phase evaluated a 12-week program with the university's Stone House [Early Childhood Education](#) Center. The second phase occurred last spring, when the

researchers partnered with Butler County Research and Extension to work with four child care providers.

The researchers are currently in the third phase of the project and are working with the Butler County Health Department to develop a training model that helps child care providers deliver the 12-week program. For the final phase, the researchers will partner with agencies such as Child Care Aware of Kansas to make the training model available to child care providers statewide.

"We've done rigorous evaluation of the program and we're finding preliminary evidence that some parents are improving the home environment," Dzewaltowski said. "The parents are providing more fresh fruits and reporting that they are eating fast food fewer times per week. They are also increasing visits to parks and reporting that their children are asking to play outside more and asking for few cakes, doughnut and muffins."

The project's 12-week program reaches young children through elements such as adult-led activities, dramatic play and snack time. It uses a traffic light, which helps children understand healthy eating through green and yellow foods, called "go" and "slow" foods. The program also uses a traffic light to understand physical activity versus sedentary activity as well as media that promote healthy or unhealthy options.

The researchers focus on two types of traffic foods with the 3- to 5-year-olds: healthy go foods that can be eaten all the time and slow foods that should be eaten in moderation. The children learn about these foods by singing a song composed by Teri Holmberg, a Kansas State University instructor of music and certified music therapist.

Daily activities focus on go and slow foods to help children start thinking about healthy eating. For instance, during dramatic play, children use a

toy stove to cook pretend fruits and vegetables. At snack time, child care providers prompt the children to think if they are eating a go or slow food. The children also learn the difference between active and sedentary toys.

"Literature has suggested that the food industry has been very effective in marketing to young kids to nag their parents," Dzewaltowski said. "What we are focusing on is positive nagging, or positive pestering, where kids start to think about asking their parents for healthy foods."

The project also includes a home connection, where the [child care](#) providers inform parents through weekly activities and newsletters to help them encourage children to make healthy choices at home.

"I am excited about this age group because I think the [children](#) are receptive to the programs, but the parents are as well," Dzewaltowski said. "[Parents](#) of this age group are at a time period where they are aware of the problems, they are hearing the media and they are looking for help."

Provided by Kansas State University

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