

## New ways to promote fitness for urban girls proposed by nursing professor

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Most people know that one of the keys to reducing or preventing health problems is to get more exercise, but determining how to best integrate physical activity into their daily lives—and having access to exercise programs—remains a significant hurdle to clear on the path to a healthier lifestyle.

Wanda Thompson, an assistant professor at the Rutgers School of Nursing–Camden, is taking a closer look at how African American women and girls living in urban areas perceive [physical activity](#). Thompson recently presented her research, "What Black Mothers and Daughters Say about Being Physically Active," at an Obesity Society conference in Atlanta in November.

"Many members of the black community already have a very positive body image, which is a good thing, but it can have its drawbacks when it comes to their perception of physical fitness," Thompson says.

The Rutgers–Camden nursing scholar says it is recommended that children up to age 18 participate in 60 minutes of physical activity every day, but a large percentage of African American females are failing to meet the objective.

"Looking at data among black [adolescent girls](#), 42.1 percent were not getting enough [exercise](#) in 2007, and the number jumped to 43.6 percent in 2009," she says. "By not being active, children increase health risk factors. If you're physically fit, you're less likely to have heart, muscular,

and joint problems."

Thompson, who worked as a nurse practitioner at the Durham County Health Department in North Carolina for more than 10 years, says she often observed girls in their late teens or early twenties who already had [health problems](#) like elevated blood pressure and showed signs of diabetes.

"These are girls whose health conditions are only going to worsen as they get older," she says. "It's increasingly important to encourage them to participate in more preventative activities from an early age."

By conducting various interviews of focus groups, Thompson says many black women and their daughters recognize the importance of [regular physical activity](#), but need some guidance on how to best work it into their days.

"A lot of people say they don't have time for exercise," Thompson says. "But increased physical activity doesn't have to mean that you need a gym membership. A person can take a walk, ride a bicycle, or even turn the music up and dance in her own home to increase her heart rate. There are things you can do to personalize the experience and make it fun."

Access is another theme that emerged from Thompson's study. She says, "In urban areas or low economic neighborhoods where there is little to no access to gyms, recreation centers, or parks, children are less likely to get the physical activity they need. You have to start looking at access and providing a safe, supportive environment where children could go and get their exercise," she notes.

Thompson suggests one way to provide access could be through churches. She is currently seeking funding to help establish organized

exercise activities at churches so she can research the effect they have on obese adolescents in [urban areas](#).

"I'd like to find a way to build aerobics or other programs into existing community church activities that will help foster a healthier lifestyle and promote physical activity in a safe environment," she says.

During a pilot study Thompson performed as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 42 adolescent girls who participated in church fitness programs indicated that they were beneficial and would participate in a permanent program.

"It's just another way to promote [physical fitness](#) in a community to ensure that young girls grow into healthy women," Thompson says.

A resident of Pemberton Township, Thompson is the author of multiple published articles including, "Physical inactivity of Black adolescent girls: Is it all about attitude?" in *Home Health Care Management and Practice* (2011). She earned her bachelor's degree from North Carolina Central University and her master's and doctoral degrees from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Provided by Rutgers University

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