

Teachers play key role in program to fight childhood obesity

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Physical activities protect young children from obesity and disease. Credit: Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

An innovative physical activities guide developed at the Frank Porter

Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) is helping North Carolina fight childhood obesity. New research shows that when teachers direct these physical activities, young children become more active and less sedentary.

"In the past twenty years, childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed," said FPG investigator Allison De Marco. "And for the first time in over a century, children's life expectancies are declining because of increased numbers of overweight kids."

De Marco said these statistics are especially alarming because research has long shown that being overweight during childhood is associated with health issues later in life. Obesity, coupled with a lack of physical [activity](#), can lead to coronary heart disease, hypertension, Type II diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

"About one-third of overweight preschoolers and one-half of overweight school-age children remain overweight as adults," she explained.

She also noted that studies have shown how physical activities can reduce the chances of developing obesity and chronic diseases, while positively influencing other areas of development. Childhood physical activity is related to better health, higher test scores, and fewer behavioral problems.

"But preschoolers engage in mostly sedentary activities," said De Marco. "Surprisingly, children don't just run outside and play, and even at recess, preschoolers actually are fairly inactive."

"Clearly, it's important to get children up and keep them moving," said FPG director Samuel L. Odom. He and his colleagues wanted to create a program that would include children even younger than the 3 to 5-year-olds that other physical activity programs had tried to target previously.

"Child care programs can be excellent avenues for increasing children's physical activity," Odom said. "We designed our guide especially for children birth to age 5 in these settings."

De Marco, FPG investigator Susan A. Zeisel, and Odom—with support from the Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation—developed a guide for the foundation's Be Active Kids program. The guide contains dozens of age-appropriate activities, such as catching bubbles and pretending to be storks, complete with teacher instructions, and teachers can incorporate other aspects of learning into the activities.

After training lead child care teachers and their assistants, the FPG team provided materials—including balls, chalk, scarves, beanbags, and hula hoops—and asked teachers to incorporate activities like "Jump for the Sky" and "Inchworm Wiggle" into their lesson plans. De Marco, Zeisel, and Odom then conducted a study of the program's effectiveness in both indoor and outdoor environments for children from six North Carolina classrooms.

De Marco said the Be Active Kids guide works to increase activity and to decrease sedentary behaviors, and results are most striking when teachers head the activities.

"When teachers directed the activities, activity levels increased in all six classrooms," she said. "And moderate to vigorous activity increased in five of six."

Whether through "Tip Toe Through Puddles" or "Lily Pad Walk," she added, results show why child care teachers must take the lead to promote high levels of physical activities for their children.

"It was fun to see how creative they could be when working from our

instructions, adapting and enhancing the activities for their own kids," she said. "Teachers are more comfortable providing activities they know are safe and developmentally appropriate."

Be Active Kids is making the [physical activity](#) guide available at no cost to child care teachers around North Carolina and offering sample activities online.

"Teachers want to promote healthier child outcomes," De Marco said. "Our work with Be Active Kids shows just how important [teachers](#) are to that process."

More information: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.10409289.2014.932237

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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