

Helping preschoolers deploy 'superpowers' against sunburn

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Ray and the Sunbeatables™ are shown. Credit: MD Anderson Cancer Center

Five globe-trotting, sun-blocking superheroes teach preschoolers about lifelong sun safety in a new curriculum available this summer based on research at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

While shade-wielding Ray and his four friends, the Sunbeatables, help teachers deliver [sun protection](#) messages through songs, games and other lessons for the under-5 set, the program also connects with parents to highlight the five superpowers: shade, clothing, sunscreen, hats and

sunglasses.

"Research has shown that excessive sun exposure during childhood increases the risk of developing melanoma and other skin cancers later in life, so it's important to develop sun protection habits at a young age," said Mary Tripp, Ph.D., instructor of Behavioral Science and one of the program's developers. "Children can learn how to be sun safe not only at school but at home with their parents."

Available in its initial pilot rollout this summer, Ray and the Sunbeatables: A Sun Safety Curriculum for Preschoolers is being taught at 50 sites reaching 2,639 preschoolers in six states through a partnership between MD Anderson and the CATCH Global Foundation. The foundation is a charity that offers evidence-based programs to promote healthy lifestyles for children and families through its Coordinated Approach To Child Health (CATCH) program.

Cancer prevention through Moon Shots Program

CATCH trains teachers on the program using materials developed by MD Anderson, including a teacher training video and instructional guide, curriculum activities about each superpower, a CD of songs, puppets, stamps, posters, a school sun protection policy guide, and parent education and outreach information.

"Everyone loves superheroes. The superhero theme and activities in our curriculum keep sun protection fun and exciting for children, which helps teachers and parents reinforce these behaviors, leading to healthy habits," Tripp said.

Based on years of MD Anderson research, the Sunbeatables program was developed through MD Anderson's Moon Shots Program, which is designed to harness scientific knowledge to dramatically reduce cancer

deaths through prevention, early detection and treatment. It's a project of the Melanoma Moon Shot, which focuses on preventing and developing better treatment for the most lethal skin cancer.

"CATCH's outstanding effectiveness is driven by creating environmental change to promote basic health behaviors," said CATCH Global Foundation Executive Director Duncan Van Dusen. "The Sunbeatables program dovetails with that approach since it combines individual education with community and parent support—and its public health upside is high because melanoma is one of the most preventable forms of cancer. Most of the sites using Sunbeatables this summer also use CATCH's physical activity and nutrition curriculum and say it fits in perfectly."

Tripp, Ellen Gritz, Ph.D., former chair of Behavioral Science, and colleagues developed the concept of the Sunbeatables, which continues MD Anderson's dedication to preschool sun protection. Research on Sun Protection is Fun! (S.P.F.), a program tested in a randomized controlled study in 20 preschools, showed that an engaging curriculum for children accompanied by videos, newsletters and other materials to connect with parents and teachers resulted in improved sun protection knowledge and practices by parents and teachers surveyed after one year and two years of using the program.

"The focus isn't only on individual change, but also change in the institutional setting, the schools' awareness and [sun safety](#) practices," said Payal Pandit Talati, program manager.

The Sunbeatables program was developed using social cognitive theory - a [behavioral science](#) theory that illustrates how people learn and develop healthy behaviors through observation, positive reinforcement and opportunities to practice.

"It's a highly interactive process - children see their peers having fun during curriculum activities or on the playground, and see their teachers role-modeling behaviors. This encourages children to practice sun safety. The children's enjoyment motivates teachers and parents to continue devoting time and energy to sun safety," Tripp said.

Connecting with CATCH Global Foundation

Melanoma Moon Shot funding allowed the team to develop Ray and the Sunbeatables. Then the [cancer prevention](#) and control moon shots platform connected with the CATCH Foundation to disseminate the finished program and other prevention initiatives developed at MD Anderson.

Scaling MD Anderson programs up nationally is a priority of the Moon Shots Program. CATCH, originally developed as an anti-obesity initiative, has been introduced in 10,000 schools, preschools and after-school programs nationwide.

Lisa Cumings is community health liaison at Kishwaukee Hospital in DeKalb, Ill., where the Kishwaukee Family YMCA teaches the Sunbeatables.

"When it comes to cancer prevention, we are always talking about eating healthy and exercising but what we fail to realize is skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. The Sunbeatables addresses this concern by starting early and targeting our preschoolers and their families. Interactive lessons make sun safety fun and engaging for our preschoolers," Cumings said.

The program occupies an unusual niche in sun safety education, Tripp said, because most programs address older children.

Team members who developed the Sunbeatables are: Tripp, Gritz, Pandit Talati, Susan Peterson, Ph.D., professor of Behavioral Science, program manager Mandy Jo Euresti, senior research coordinator Elzbieta Winters and research coordinator Carmen Galvan.

The Melanoma Moon Shot prevention team, co-led by Tripp and Peterson, is working on a Sunbeatables program for elementary school children, and studying approaches to promote skin cancer prevention behaviors for middle school and high school students.

Ray and the Sunbeatables use their superpowers of sun protection as they travel the world on their ship, the Eclipse, showing children how to be sun safe every day and everywhere. From left to right are Chloe, whose superpower is protective clothing, Serena (sunscreen), Ray (shade), Stefan (sunglasses) and Hannah (hats).

Provided by University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center

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