

Culturally tailored obesity intervention a success for hispanic students

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Katherine Arlinghaus is the lead study author and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Health and Human Performance. Credit: University of Houston

An obesity intervention for Hispanic middle school students led by researchers at the University of Houston found that with consistent

guidance from high school health mentors, called *compañeros*, students not only lost significantly more weight but also kept it off longer.

Trained as peer health mentors by their [physical education teachers](#), high school students at several YES Prep charter school campuses in Houston offered daily support and advice about exercise and nutrition to middle school kids during PE class.

After six months, 80 percent of the kids who worked with the *compañeros* decreased or maintained their standardized body mass index, compared to 64 percent of students who didn't work with *compañeros*. After one year, those weight reductions were mostly sustained, as 68 percent of students who worked with *compañeros* and 55 percent of students who did not, decreased or maintained their BMI.

"The high school students, or *compañeros*, likely understand the kids better because they've had similar homes lives, challenges and cultural experiences," said Katherine Arlinghaus, lead study author and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Health and Human Performance. "They are probably able to relate in a way that PE teachers can't."

The results of the three-year study were recently published in *Preventing Chronic Disease*, a peer reviewed journal from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDC). The study led to Arlinghaus, a registered dietician, to be named co-winner of the 2017 Annual Student Research Paper Contest organized by the journal.

Co-authors include Baylor College of Medicine faculty Jennette P. Moreno, HHP graduate [student](#) Layton Reesor and HHP faculty Daphne Hernandez and Craig Johnston.

"The younger kids might perceive the [high school students](#) to be cool. So if they're telling them it's awesome to eat carrots, then maybe they'll start eating them too," said Arlinghaus.

Promotoras, or Hispanic community health workers, are frequently used as a cost effective strategy to translate complex medical advice to some members of the Hispanic community. Peer health mentors have been used in schools to promote nutrition and physical activity among students. This research merged both approaches to address the growing number of Hispanic children who have obesity.

According to the CDC, almost 22 percent of Hispanic children ages 2-19 have obesity, compared to less than 15 percent of non-Hispanic white children.

"The high school compañeros were excellent to watch as they worked with our [middle school students](#). The shift in effort from other classes I've taught was fascinating," said Kyle Stallard, YES Prep Brays Oaks PE teacher and course leader. "All I could think was, 'Why haven't we been doing this longer?' "

Arlinghaus believes her research group has developed an effective school-based weight management program for low-income, Hispanic youth at increased risk for developing obesity.

"Although it is important for more research to be conducted to see if our results could be replicated, compañeros could be a realistic strategy for a [school](#) to use without a lot of extra funding or outside support," she said.

More information: Compañeros: High School Students Mentor Middle School Students to Address Obesity Among Hispanic Adolescents [dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.170130](https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.170130) , www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2017/17_0130.htm

Provided by University of Houston

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