

Community involvement important in fight against childhood obesity

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Community support of school obesity prevention programs is critical to achieving a significant decrease in obesity among children, according to researchers at the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Advancement of Healthy Living, which is part of The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth).

Deanna Hoelscher, Ph.D., professor of behavioral sciences at UTHealth's School of Public Health Austin Regional Campus, examined obesity prevalence changes among children in Travis County after the implementation of a school-based obesity intervention program, the Coordinated Approach To Child Health (CATCH). Hoelscher, director of the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living, compared the traditional school-based focus (CATCH BasicPlus) against the traditional school-based focus with greater community input (CATCH Community). The results were published in the February issue of the journal *Obesity*.

The study found an 8.3 percent decrease in obesity prevalence from spring 2007 to spring 2008 among children in the CATCH Community program compared to a 1.3 percent decrease in obesity prevalence among children in the CATCH BP program. The study was conducted in low-income minority schools in Travis County. Research has shown that low-income minority children are at greater risk of being overweight. Nationally, 16.9 percent of U.S. children ages 2-19 year old are currently classified as obese, according to the latest National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey results.

"Data from the Travis County schools show that school-based obesity intervention programs, when implemented with complementary community involvement, can significantly prevent the onset of child obesity," said Hoelscher. "The data we found is consistent with data found in other studies of school and community approaches to childhood obesity."

All schools were provided with CATCH program training materials and support visits. The CATCH Community schools also received support for building school and community partnerships, as well as creating environments to increase physical activity and healthy eating promotion through CATCH school committees. Hoelscher said this study is unique because it focuses on low-income ethnically diverse populations and efforts to include the community.

"These results reinforce the need to focus increasingly on environmental and societal level changes, as well as individual approaches, to reduce childhood obesity," said Hoelscher.

Similar results were found in Hoelscher's El Paso SPAN (Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition) study, published in the October issue of *Obesity*. In El Paso, researchers found a decrease of 7 percent in the prevalence of [obesity](#) among 4th grade children observed over a 2.5-year period following an initiative spearheaded by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, which included widespread implementation of the CATCH program, a television/radio advertisement campaign, a community-based nutrition education program and a walking promotion program.

Provided by University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston

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