

START SMART:

Healthy Weight in Early Childhood

Grantmakers In Health convened a group of grantmakers, researchers, and practitioners on October 16, 2012, for an Issue Dialogue to discuss healthy weight in early childhood.

The statistics are stark. More than half of obese children are overweight by age two, and approximately one in five is overweight or obese by their sixth birthday. Recognizing that a focus on the first five years of a child's life holds great potential, innovators are working to ramp up and replicate promising solutions that focus on the period of life before school, and possibly even before birth (CDC 2010).

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS?

In 2011 the Institute of Medicine released *Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Policies*. The report recommends actions that should be pursued by health care providers, child care providers, federal programs, and other institutions that affect children's lives. Their recommendations touch on the following:

- Growth Monitoring
- Marketing and Screen Time
- Physical Activity
- Sleep
- Healthy Eating

SNAPSHOTS OF FOUNDATION STRATEGIES

Foundations and corporate giving programs are investing in an impressive array of early childhood obesity prevention efforts.

- ***Beginning in the Perinatal Period*** – Kaiser Permanente's pediatric members mirror national statistics: 35 percent are overweight or obese. Kaiser Permanente has put an intense focus on breast feeding and using body mass index (BMI) as a vital sign, recording it at every visit and using it to track weight gain and progress over time. Kaiser Permanente also invests in a wide variety of community interventions, including the use of live theater and dance in preschool and early school settings to get messages to children about healthy eating and active living.
- ***Reaching out to Kids*** – Since 2007 the HNH Foundation in New Hampshire has supported the Early Sprouts Gardening and Nutrition Experiences for the Young Child curriculum model. Preschool children learn to garden and prepare seasonal produce, and become familiar with healthy choices through multiple exposures.
- ***Engaging Parents*** – Engaging parents in raising healthy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ISSUE BRIEF NO. 41
MARCH 2013

BASED ON A GRANTMAKERS IN HEALTH ISSUE DIALOGUE
WASHINGTON, DC

children is one of The Colorado Health Foundation's key funding strategies. It supports the Baby Bear Hugs (BBH) home visitation program, for example, to teach families about eating healthy foods and incorporating activity both indoors and outdoors. BBH connects trained visitors to families as early in the pregnancy as possible, providing support, education, and connection to community resources.

- ***Supporting Health Care Providers*** – The Greater Rochester Health Foundation's Childhood Healthy Weight is a 10-year, four-part strategy to bring 85 percent of Monroe County children ages 2 to 10 into the healthy weight category as measured by BMI. The initiative's intermediate results show promise: the 26 pediatric practices participating in a physician's learning collaborative were more likely to measure BMI and discuss the child's weight status with parents than other practitioners.
- ***Partnering with Head Start*** – Some of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation's most exciting achievements have occurred in child care programs. One striking example of improvement was in ABC Head Start, which provided the I Am Moving, I Am Learning 1+2+3 curriculum in five sites. Among 396 three-year-olds enrolled in Head Start between 2009 and 2010, there was a statistically significant increase in the percentage of children in the healthy weight category, from 59.3 percent to 65.7 percent.
- ***Farm to Preschool*** – The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and other funders are working to expand the national farm-to-school model to early childhood care and education settings. Farm to Preschool's goals include influencing the eating habits of young children and influencing policies through a local food lens. Program components include sourcing local foods in school snacks and meals, promoting and increasing access to local foods, and offering parent workshops.
- ***Investing in Child Care Centers*** – More than 31 percent of North Carolina's children ages two to four are overweight or considered at risk for becoming overweight. The Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC), produced by the University of North Carolina Center for Health Promotion and Disease

Prevention, aims to improve nutrition and physical activity in child care settings to prevent obesity. The BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation invested over \$240,000 in the NAP SACC pilot program from 2008 to 2009. More than 90 percent of the centers showed progress, and about half demonstrated improvement in nutrition and physical activity policies and practices.

- ***Developing Comprehensive Initiatives*** – In 2010 the BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina Foundation launched the three-year, \$3 million Shape NC: Healthy Starts for Young Children initiative. Shape NC works with existing networks across the state to target children in child care facilities, their families, and child care professionals to increase knowledge and awareness of nutrition and the importance of physical activity.
- ***Emphasizing Systems Change, as well as Behavioral Change*** – The HNHFoundation has funded policy development, built environment, and systems change strategies, becoming more focused on supporting initiatives that consider the impact of the environment on childhood obesity. Some projects are small, like a grant to the Town of Hebron, which introduced land use planning and design concepts to facilitate walking and biking. On a larger scale, the foundation is working with its regional planning commission partners to help create healthier communities statewide.
- ***Beginning Community Dialogues*** – Recognizing that the rate of obesity in early childhood has risen dramatically in recent years, The Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation hosted an early childhood obesity summit to begin a community dialogue on the need for effective interventions. Follow-up discussions are underway, and a blog is being created to keep the conversation going.
- ***Launching a Media Campaign*** – In 2012 The Horizon Foundation launched a media campaign in Howard County, Maryland, to convince parents not to purchase sugary drinks for family use. As part of the “Howard County. Unsweetened.” campaign, the foundation developed www.HoCoUnsweetened.org to serve as a resource. The campaign is part of a larger initiative, which includes public policy changes and coalition building.
- ***Building a National Movement*** – In 2009 Nemours and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched Healthy Kids, Healthy Future (HKHF) to promote health and prevent obesity in children ages birth to five. HKHF held a conference to bring together experts to identify innovative strategies to improve wellness policies and practices in early care and education. Since then, HKHF has contributed to the scaling and spreading of efforts to support healthy eating, physical activity, and limited screen time in early care and education settings.

- ***Advancing Policy, Practice, and Research*** – Nemours and the CDC also formed the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Steering Committee (HKHFSC), which developed and implemented a strategic plan to advance policy, practice, and research. The HKHFSC has also provided expertise to Partnership for a Healthier America and is in the process of formulating a strategic plan for the next phase of work.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Experts in the field point to other opportunities for philanthropic investment.

- ***Acknowledge and Address Bias and Stigma*** – No child should be blamed, criticized, or teased about his or her weight. Invest in training programs for parents, health care professionals, and child care providers; support anti-bullying efforts; involve mental health professionals in the design of programs; and focus on health, not weight (Brown 2013).
- ***Engage the Entire Family*** – Families are essential partners in efforts to reduce children’s obesity risk factors. Invite them to decisionmaking tables and develop solutions that take into account their assets, priorities, and cultural backgrounds.
- ***Link Healthy Weight Interventions to School Readiness Initiatives*** – Foundation-funded initiatives are investing in efforts that aim to simultaneously improve health and educational outcomes. Create opportunities for experts in early childhood education and early childhood development to come together and design interventions that are mutually reinforcing.
- ***Think about Dose, Spread, and Scale*** – When designing and supporting an intervention, think about the number of people it will reach, and if it is strong enough to change behaviors. Funders should ask themselves how to reach the most children in the shortest period of time with the highest impact strategies (CCHE 2012; Chang 2012).
- ***Strive toward Population-Level Intervention Strategies*** – Obesity prevention strategies that hold the most promise are those that span multiple settings (Foltz et al. 2012). No one foundation – or grantee organization – can do it all; work with strategic partners and identify shared priorities.

The Issue Dialogue *Start Smart: Healthy Weight in Early Childhood* and its associated publication were made possible by grants from The Colorado Health Foundation and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Health Resources and Services Administration.

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