

Children's Health Summit: Fighting Back Against Childhood Obesity

Issue Addressed

Obesity is a fast-growing health issue affecting children and adolescents across the nation and here at home. Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE), along with agency and community partners, implemented a unique, collaborative solution aimed at raising awareness, providing education and effecting workable strategies for preventing obesity in children and families in our community. From working regularly with children and families, Family and Community Health Sciences (FCHS) faculty were aware that NJ residents mirrored the national statistics on obesity, which indicate that 13% of US children aged 6 to 11 years and 14% of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years are overweight (1). Those numbers represent a three-fold increase in weight for adolescents in the past two decades. The effects of overweight can be devastating both physically and emotionally. Adult health issues, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes has increased dramatically in children (2). Further troubling statistics reported that overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. That likelihood increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese (3). Overweight children suffer emotionally, too, facing social discrimination, bullying, poor self-esteem and depression (4).

Project Description

The Children's Health Summit is an all-day professional training conference addressing childhood obesity. The Summits are comprehensive educational forums, featuring workshops, exhibits and focused networking opportunities to further extend the outreach and education. In December 2003, the first Summit was piloted and tested in Cape May County, in partnership with county and state agencies, and made possible by a competitive grant of \$3,500 from the Cape May County Human Services Advisory Council. The FCHS department expanded the program to reach additional NJ residents with seven Summits being held throughout the state by August 2006. Summits have been successfully conducted in Cape May, Atlantic, Union, Passaic, Cumberland, Hunterdon-Somerset, and Middlesex counties, training more than 800 school, health, and social service professionals in the causes, consequences, and solutions surrounding childhood obesity. In 2007, Summits are scheduled for Mercer, Morris, and Essex counties.



Project goals and objectives

Children's Health Summits:

- Raise awareness of the scope and severity of the childhood obesity epidemic facing today's society;
- Present the latest research findings from a variety of sources;
- Identify strategies for affecting change;
- Provide attendees with educational materials for use with professional and lay clientele;
- Organize and facilitate local-level partnerships, called ***Building Healthy Kids Coalitions***, that will stay in place after the Summits conclude.



Audience

The target audience for Children's Health Summits includes: teachers, school nurses, dieticians, social workers, school personnel, health care professionals, school food service directors, child care providers, coaches, nutrition educators, counselors, family therapists and any other professionals or volunteers working with youth and families.

Results

Media coverage

Children's Health Summits generated local and regional press coverage, including a feature interview on Comcast Newsmakers, a statewide cable program and news feature on an NBC affiliate. Newspaper, radio and television coverage helped to heighten public awareness and extend the message about childhood obesity to a broader audience.

Evaluations

Behavior changes reported: Data for 837 attendees has been analyzed to date; 94% of participants surveyed reported a better understanding of obesity causes; 93% noted a better understanding of physical and emotional health consequences; 93% reported a better understanding of portion sizes; 87% noted a better understanding of the benefits of physical activity.

Actions as a result of participation: 95% of Summit attendees agreed to share information from the conference with at least one other person; 85% will encourage children to eat a nutritious diet; 83% agreed to set a good example for children, in terms of eating habits and physical activity. Participants self-reported a commitment to one or more of the following behaviors: eat a healthy breakfast, help children find other ways besides food to handle set backs or successes, play and be physically active with children, select standard food portions instead of super-sized ones, teach children to accept all body shapes and sizes; let children know that they are loved no matter what; recognize children for their positive qualities, strengths and abilities instead of their physical appearance. The average number of behavior changes that participants committed to is 12. Follow up evaluation data is currently being collected.

Help turn childhood obesity "talk" into action. Contact us today!

Evidence of impact

More than 50% of participants indicated a willingness to continue their participation beyond each Summit through their membership in local **Building Healthy Kids Coalitions** (BHKC). These, community-based, grass roots coalitions are organized and facilitated by FCHS and consist of volunteer members wishing to address solutions appropriate to their local concerns. FCHS educators train coalition leaders and provide initial leadership and direction.



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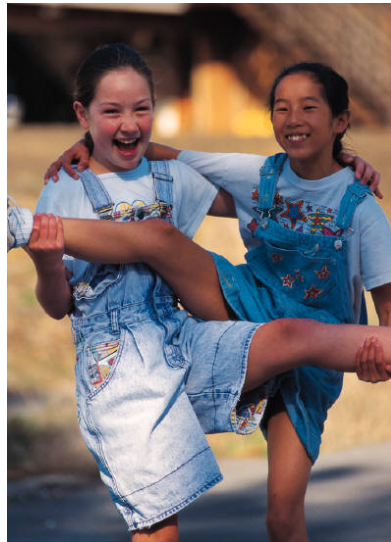
Two Building Healthy Kids Coalitions (BHKC) have been working on a walking program (Steppin' Out Cape May County and Steppin' Out Union County) for adults and children.

One BHKC has joined a collaborative initiative for a healthier Passaic County which has brought many community leaders together to address childhood obesity in the county. The BHKC in Atlantic County joined forces with AtlantiCare Foundation and they are working with area schools to support the efforts of staff and students including an after-school Food Club, and annual bike-a-thon. Three more BHKC are forming to address obesity-related issues such as: reviewing school wellness policies, limiting snacks or changing snack choices, reviewing school policy on vending machines, motivating parents to get involved. We continue to hear success stories from Coalition members. Stories like, "Since I attended the Summit, I started a morning walking club for staff and students." A school food service director shared, "After the Summit, I only order whole wheat breads and pizza crust instead of white bread products for the school lunch" and a school nurse, "We no longer permit teachers to reward students with soda." And a Health and PE teacher, "The Summit motivated me to approach the school board to complete the construction of the walking path behind our school. And I also worked with our principal to move recess to before rather than after lunch. The kids eat better and have more energy." Two fitness trainers/ gym managers told us that after the Summit they started a fitness program specifically for kids at their gym. These are significant outcomes. Childhood obesity needs a multifaceted response and we are helping to make that happen. We have invited our partners to help turn childhood obesity "talk" into action. **Together we are making a difference for children and families.**

**For more information or to schedule a program in your county,
contact Family and Community Health Sciences at the
Rutgers Cooperative Extension office in your county.
<http://njaes.rutgers.edu/county/>**

References:

1. National Center for Health Statistics (NHANES). Prevalence of Overweight Among Children and Adolescents – United States 1999.
2. The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity – www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity - United States 2001.
3. Ibid
Perceived Quality of Life of Obese Children. Journal of the American Medical Association: 2003; 289 (14):1813 -1819



Marilou Rochford, MA, CFLE
Family and Community Health Sciences Educator
Rutgers Cooperative Extension
4 Moore Road
Cape May Court House, NJ 08210
609-465-5115 ext. 609
rochford@aesop.rutgers.edu

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