

new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 48/FEBRUARY 2012

Building Local Capacity to Prevent Childhood Obesity in New York

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What is the Issue?

In the last three decades, the proportion of overweight and obese children in the U. S. has increased at an alarming rate and remains high (1*). Reflecting national trends, 17% of New York school-aged children are obese, and close to one third are overweight or obese (2). The rate for preschoolers is not far behind with 14.5% considered obese (Figure 1) (3). Obese children and adolescents are at a higher risk for hypertension, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes, and they are also more likely to be obese as adults (4). In addition to health consequences, obesity carries significant social, psychological and economic costs (4). NY ranks second among states in adult obesity-related medical expenditures, with total spending at \$7.6 billion, 81% of which is publicly funded through Medicaid and Medicare (5).

Obesity prevention efforts have traditionally focused on individual behavior change, which is necessary, but not sufficient. These individual-based approaches have turned out to be ineffective or unsustainable (6). A more comprehensive and coordinated, or “ecological,” approach is needed to address community conditions that serve as barriers to healthy lifestyle choices.

An ecological approach focuses on addressing factors in all the multiple environments that influence individual behavior, such as the availability of affordable, healthy foods in stores and schools, and the accessibility of safe places to exercise and play. An ecological intervention is more likely to be effective because it makes changes where children eat, play and live: homes, schools, after school programs, parks and neighborhoods. Creating environments that facilitate healthy choices has the potential to prevent obesity not in just a few individuals, but among all community members.

This results in a broader positive public health impact.

The Institute of Medicine’s report **Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity** recognizes the key role local communities play in obesity prevention efforts with these Guiding Principles (4):

- Local government efforts are critical in childhood obesity prevention.
- Collaboration and strong partnerships are key to childhood obesity prevention efforts at the local level.
- Evaluation at the local level is vital to understanding what works.
- It is important to consider potential negative and positive consequences of local government policies.

For many community-based professionals, taking an ecological approach to obesity prevention requires a new way of thinking and working. It involves more collaboration, sometimes with new partners, to implement strategies designed to create physical, social, economic and policy environments that support healthy lifestyles. For example, nutrition and health practitioners may need to work with school administrators, city and regional planners, and local government officials to create more

walking and bike paths. There is a critical need to train professionals in this new approach, but many have limited time and resources to travel to professional development opportunities.

How Is It Being Addressed?

Online training is an efficient and cost-effective way to reach community-based professionals. Faculty in Cornell’s Division of Nutritional Sciences developed an in-depth course, **Preventing Childhood Obesity: An Ecological Approach**, as part of the Cornell NutritionWorks online professional development program at www.nutritionworks.cornell.edu. During the 6-week facilitated course, practitioners learn how to apply an ecological approach in the community where they work.

The content is organized around a health program planning model that underscores the need to determine the underlying behavioral, environmental, predisposing, enabling and reinforcing factors that contribute to excessive weight gain in children locally. This leads to a strategic intervention plan. As they progress through the course, participants (working individually or in teams) assess and prioritize factors in their community, set objectives, identify collaboration partners, and develop an action plan for intervention tailored to their own settings and target populations.

To date, the course has been delivered to 557 professionals in 47 states; close to 30% in NYS. Participants have included Cooperative Extension nutrition and 4-H educators, WIC nutritionists, school nurses, family and consumer science teachers, food service directors, recreation

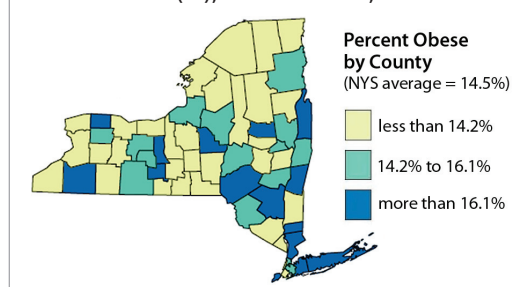
and youth bureau directors, and others. The course is meeting its overall objective of increasing the capacity of practitioners to use an ecological approach in childhood obesity prevention. Results from the first six sessions show statistically significant increases in self-reported knowledge, skills and confidence of participants in using an ecological approach in contrast to a comparison group of similar professionals (7).

Conclusion

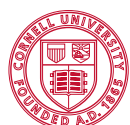
New approaches to childhood obesity prevention are critical but require fundamental changes in the way many community-based professionals think and act. Programs like **Preventing Childhood Obesity: An Ecological Approach** are important training tools but will not succeed on their own. Local officials will need to understand the roles current local environments and policies play in contributing to childhood obesity. In addition, they must be willing to work collaboratively to transform their communities into places that support and promote healthy lifestyle choices.

**This issue guest edited by Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman. All references cited in parentheses are available in a separate document posted along with this publication on the CaRDI website.*

Figure 1: Low Income Preschool Children (age 2-4) Who are Obese (%), New York State, 2007-2009



Source: www.health.ny.gov/statistics/chac/general/pdf/overwt.pdf



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