



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Study Shows Head Start Programs Surpass Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Requirements

Programs Obtaining Meals through School Districts Report Fewer Healthy Eating Practices

Princeton, N.J., December 7, 2009 – A new study in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* finds that the majority of the nation’s Head Start programs report doing more to support healthy eating and physical activity than is required by existing federal regulations. Head Start is the nation’s largest federally funded early childhood education program, serving one million low-income preschool students, 30 percent of whom are obese or overweight.

Researchers from Temple University and Mathematica Policy Research analyzed survey responses from 87 percent of Head Start programs in the United States. Study authors point to two key findings as examples of Head Start programs moving beyond current federal regulations: 70 percent of programs reported serving only non-fat or 1 percent fat milk, and 75 percent of programs reported providing children at least 30 minutes each day of adult-led physical activity. The federal regulations governing Head Start do not specify the type of milk children should be served nor do they specify the number of minutes each day children should be physically active.

“Head Start has traditionally been a leader in the field of early childhood education, and this is another example of how they are out in front. Yet they should evaluate their current standards for healthy eating and physical activity so that all programs are encouraged to implement current best practices for obesity prevention,” said Robert Whitaker, lead author and professor of Public Health and Pediatrics at Temple University.

Study authors also found that Head Start programs that used a school district’s food service to provide meals to students reported fewer healthy eating practices than programs hiring their own cooks or working directly with a food service company. For example, programs that used their districts’ school food service were more likely to serve flavored milk, such as chocolate milk, or pre-fried meats, such as chicken nuggets, compared to programs that did not use a school food service. Almost one-third of Head Start programs used a school district’s food service to prepare their meals.

Of the Head Start programs studied:

- 94 percent of Head Start programs served some fruit each day, other than 100 percent fruit juice, and 97 percent served some vegetables each day, other than fried potatoes;
- 54 percent did not allow soda or other vending machines for staff use;
- 96 percent did not keep children sitting for more than 30 minutes at a time;
- 90 percent of programs limited television or video to less than 60 minutes each day;
- 89 percent had an on-site outdoor play area at every center; and
- 56 percent of programs provided children with at least 60 minutes each day of unstructured physical activity *in addition* to the 30 minutes each day of adult-led physical activity.

“This is the first time anyone has looked at practices and environments related to healthy eating and physical activity in Head Start. The study sheds light on what they’re doing right and areas where they can improve access to healthy foods and increase opportunities for physical activity for children early in life,” Whitaker said.

The study, entitled, “Study of Healthy Activity and Eating Practices and Environments in Head Start (SHAPES),” was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through two national programs, Healthy Eating Research and Active Living Research.

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About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research is a \$16 million national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program supports research on environmental and policy strategies to promote healthy eating among children to prevent childhood obesity, especially among the low-income and racial and ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org.

About Active Living Research

Active Living Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, stimulates and supports research to identify environmental factors and policies that influence physical activity for children and families to inform effective strategies to prevent childhood obesity, particularly in low-income and racial/ethnic communities at highest risk. Active Living Research wants solid research to be part of the public debate about active living. For more information, visit www.activelivingresearch.org.

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