



THE HSC HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The HSC Foundation

**Preventing Childhood
Obesity in Lower-Income
Communities**

February 2007

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A focus group report of African-American and Latino families' understanding of healthy lifestyles, barriers, and challenges

Executive Summary

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OVERVIEW — The HSC Foundation, with support from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, conducted a series of focus groups aimed at identifying ways to reverse the trend of overweight and obesity in lower-income African-American and Latino children and adolescents. The findings of this research indicate that for many of these families, issues relating to daily survival such as employment, safety, limited finances, and education take priority over the issues of overweight and obesity. Messages about preventing childhood obesity must be sensitive to these concerns and aim to raise the priority of increased physical activity and good nutrition. Through this study, researchers hoped to identify messages and methods that would most effectively motivate these families to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles. By gaining a clear understanding of how to effectively communicate with lower-income Latino and African-American families about childhood obesity and its associated health risks, results of this study can help to inform messaging, programs, and policies created to address the epidemic.

Supported by grants from

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

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Initial Findings

Introduction

Obesity is widely recognized as one of the most pressing health threats to children and families across the country. Today, one-third of American children and adolescents are either obese or at risk of becoming obese.^I There are serious health implications associated with obesity for children, including increased risk for developing heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, orthopedic problems, and asthma.^{II}

When ethnicity and income are considered, the picture is even more troubling. African-American and Hispanic families have the greatest risk for overweight and obesity, and youngsters from lower-income families have a higher risk for obesity than those from higher-income families. More than 40 percent of African-American teenagers are overweight, and nearly 25 percent are obese.^{III} Hispanic children have the highest lifetime risk of diabetes (52 percent for boys, 45 percent for girls), followed closely by African-American children (49 percent for boys, 40 percent for girls).^{IV}

As the debate over how to address the rising childhood obesity epidemic continues, it is especially important to explore how attitudes, environmental factors, and policies influence children's health in these most vulnerable populations. For this reason, The HSC Foundation, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, conducted a community-based research initiative with Latino and African-American parents and adolescents living in households in the Washington metropolitan area with annual incomes under \$30,000.

Researchers interviewed the participants to learn more about their attitudes regarding health and obesity, current lifestyle behaviors, and sources of information about health-related topics. The study also assessed participants' perceived social and cultural barriers to changing current behavior patterns and explored potential approaches for overcoming those barriers.

Through this study, researchers hoped to identify messages and methods that would most effectively motivate these families to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles. By gaining a clear understanding of how to effectively communicate with lower-income Latino and African-American families about childhood obesity and its associated health risks, results of this study can help to inform messaging, programs, and policies created to address the epidemic.

Defining a Healthy Lifestyle

Understanding issues that affect lower-income African-American and Latino families on a daily basis provides critical insight about their priorities, concerns, and lifestyle behaviors. It is important for public health officials and policy-makers to consider these issues when developing messages, strategies, and interventions aimed at promoting healthier lifestyles among these populations. In effort to assess participants' priorities, researchers asked them to identify and rank their most pressing issues, to describe how their communities shape their lives, and to define what a healthy lifestyle means to them.

Most parents listed unemployment, limited finances, safety, education, immigration, language barriers, and spirituality as their top concerns. Many parents admitted that they might not have identified nutrition and physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle if researchers had not prompted them to discuss it.

Parents commonly described healthy children as well-adjusted socially and emotionally. According to one parent, "A healthy child loves to play, loves to laugh, likes to interact with other kids and has good manners." Latino parents typically associated a child's weight with overall health. As long as children did not look too thin or too fat, they were considered healthy. Some Latino parents were more inclined to worry about thin children, and one commented, "We believe that if the child is fat or plump, he is well."

In contrast, teenagers' perceptions of a healthy lifestyle emphasized personal behaviors, such as making healthy food choices, engaging in physical activity, and avoiding smoking, alcohol and unprotected sex. Teens typically discussed activities and habits that should be avoided in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

When prompted, most respondents acknowledged the importance of healthy food choices and regular physical activity as elements of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Although parents and teenagers generally recognize these as key components of a healthy lifestyle, they believe that time constraints, environmental barriers, and limited resources often hinder their efforts. For example, many parents know that offering nutritious foods will help keep their children healthy, but they're too tired at the end of a busy day to prepare healthy meals, they're frustrated because they have limited access to supermarkets, and they have little control over what their children eat at school.

Implications

Messages about preventing childhood obesity that are developed for lower-income African-American and Latino families must be sensitive to their central concerns and existing barriers discussed during these interviews. Generic public health messages about overweight and obesity do not appear to resonate with these communities. Understanding that competing issues related to daily survival often outweigh the importance of being overweight or obese will help inform efforts to promote healthier lifestyles among these communities.

Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors

Assessing respondents' current health-related behaviors is one way to evaluate their knowledge of behaviors that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. It also helps to determine specific guidelines and activities parents and teens are willing to follow. This practical information will help public health officials promote effective messages, strategies, and programs that encourage lower-income African-American and Latino families to engage in healthier behaviors.

Researchers asked parents and teens to describe a typical day, including the factors that most influence their diets and levels of physical activity. In addition, participants were prompted to describe personal and environmental obstacles that prevented them from engaging in healthier behaviors. Lastly, respondents were asked to rank a number of physical activities and eating habits they would be willing to try in order to improve their family's health.

When asked to rate how healthy a typical day was, most parents and teens declared fairly low scores. For African-American parents, lack of physical activity was a contributing factor. Lack of physical activity was also a factor for Latino parents, but they also expressed concern for limited control over food selection, especially for their children. Teens reported low scores and acknowledged that they did not regularly consume a healthy diet. Both African-American and Latino teens emphasized that most of their meals were eaten outside of home and expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and choices of foods offered at school.

Parents indicated that family income was the most important factor that influences food purchases. Many parents reported the need to "stretch their dollars" and carefully plan their shopping according to prices and weekly grocery store promotions. Children's food preferences were another important influence—parents did not want to waste money on foods that their children refuse to eat.

Parents and teens both reported that physical activity can help them to feel relaxed, relieve stress, and improve self-esteem. Although the respondents recognized these benefits, many indicated that time constraints and environmental barriers prevented them from engaging in regular physical activity. Safety was a strong concern among African-American and Latino parents, while teens cited time constraints as a major obstacle.

When presented with suggestions for how to increase physical activity and improve eating habits, respondents had positive reactions to the following ideas: participating in an exercise or dance class, starting a walk-to-school program, taking a cooking class, enrolling children in a sports program, and starting a group to lobby local officials for more recreational facilities.

While parents and teens were generally supportive of these ideas, many also indicated that time and financial constraints may prevent them from taking advantage of these opportunities.

Implications

African-American and Latino respondents believe that physical activity and healthy eating are important, but indicate that significant environmental barriers make it difficult for them to sustain healthy behaviors. Jurisdictions need to be held accountable for providing clean, safe recreational spaces, and for addressing the fears of crime that may restrict outdoor activity. Communities also should work to leverage and expand existing resources available through schools, recreational facilities, and local businesses. For example, improving school nutrition policies, offering free health education workshops and exercise classes for residents, or supporting farmers' markets would increase the availability of affordable nutritious foods and create more opportunities for physical activity. Messages and interventions aimed at reducing childhood obesity should integrate culturally relevant suggestions and must be sensitive to families with limited resources.

Perceptions of Overweight and Obesity

Understanding how African-American and Latino parents and teens perceive the terms "overweight" and "obesity" can greatly impact how information about the associated health risks is communicated to families. As part of the interview process, parents and teens were asked a range of questions to help researchers gain insights into their attitudes, beliefs, and concerns regarding overweight and obesity. Participants were asked to define overweight and obesity, identify concerns they might have about the issue, and describe any family discussions surrounding overweight or obesity.

Several themes emerged from the parent discussion groups. Parents agreed that being overweight was associated with unhealthy eating habits and physical inactivity and that being obese was associated with the most extensive health problems and the greatest physical limitations. Few participants were knowledgeable about the scientific distinctions between

overweight and obesity or the body mass index screening tool. Researchers found that language barriers made understanding the distinctions especially challenging for Latino respondents.

Most participating parents blamed parents of overweight children for overfeeding their children or not providing healthy foods at home—yet many participants also admitted telling their own children that being overweight was hereditary and beyond their control. Nearly all of the parents expressed concern for chronic diseases, low self-esteem, and poor body image among overweight children. They also reported unsuccessful attempts at discussing issues of weight, diet, and physical activity with their own children.

For teens, being overweight was associated with unhealthy eating behaviors and health problems. Some of their most common concerns regarding overweight and obesity included poor health, physical limitations, and appearance. Teens also shared specific beliefs about how race influences obesity in their communities. For example, one perception was that African-Americans have less healthy eating habits than do Caucasians, because of limited financial resources and fewer food choices. Male Latinos expressed the belief that Caucasians are more concerned with being overweight than are Latinos or African-Americans.

Implications

Most participants commonly define overweight and obesity on a case-by-case basis—dependent mostly on individual appearance rather than scientifically accepted weight categories. This may indicate an inability to accurately identify personal weight status or the weight status of their children, and should be considered when developing messages and resources for these communities.

Participants also voiced frustration over limited resources and community support. Both African-American and Latino parents say limited access to fresh nutritious foods and safe places to play in their communities make it difficult for parents to encourage their children to eat well and be active. Like their parents, African-American and Latino teens do not believe they have support from the community to help them sustain healthy lifestyle changes. Informing political and community leaders of the issues raised during this study may facilitate more effective approaches for communicating with these most vulnerable families.

Sources of Information

In addition to discussing their beliefs regarding overweight and obesity, respondents also were asked if they seek health information, how they receive that information, and which sources they trust. Parents reported that their sources of health information include pamphlets from doctors' offices and clinics, magazines, radio, television and the Internet. Some parents also proactively seek information from programs sponsored by Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and from local nutrition hotlines. Most parents believe that acquaintances who are making successful changes, such as losing weight, are very credible sources.

With the exception of Latina females, most teens believed they were knowledgeable about topics related to healthy lifestyles. However, many teens wanted to know more, and were especially interested in information that was specific to their personal health and weight status. Among teens, the most credible information sources included the school health program, doctors, and nutritionists.

Parents and teens alike identified a preference for a more active learning style, like show-and-tell or hands-on techniques, as opposed to simply reading. Parents and teens also agreed that messengers who are in good physical condition and had made lifestyle changes that resulted in improving their own health would most strongly motivate them to adopt healthier habits.

Implications

Delivering messages that will motivate Latino and African-American families to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles greatly depends on effective communications vehicles and messengers. According to respondents, it is important to provide engaging, hands-on learning programs that involve multiple family members. These programs could be sponsored in schools or community-based organizations, and they need to be affordable and easily accessible for both parents and children. Including strong messengers in the program, such as community members and health professionals who have succeeded in making healthy lifestyle changes is equally important.

Conclusion

Study findings demonstrate a clear need for a comprehensive approach to address childhood obesity among lower-income African-American and Latino families in the Washington metropolitan area. For many of these families, issues relating to daily survival such as employment, safety, limited finances, and education take priority over the issues of overweight and obesity. Messages about preventing childhood obesity must be sensitive to these concerns and aim to raise the priority of increased physical activity and good nutrition. While respondents generally acknowledged the importance of good nutrition and regular physical activity, they expressed frustration and concern over time constraints and the lack of resources and community support that would allow them to sustain healthy behaviors.

By exploring perceptions and beliefs, assessing current healthy behaviors, and determining trusted sources of health-related information, researchers gained valuable insight about how to create and deliver messages that will resonate with lower-income African-American and Latino families. Collaboration among community leaders and government, health care providers, schools, and families is also critical to helping these most vulnerable populations adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles.

ⁱOgden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, McDowell MA, Tabak CJ and Flegal KM. "Prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United States, 1999-2004." *JAMA*, 295:1549-1555, 2006.

ⁱⁱU.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Background and Purpose of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans," in *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2005, 1-4. 6th edition (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 2005). < <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/Chapter1.pdf> >

ⁱⁱⁱ"Prevalence And Trends In Overweight Among US Children And Adolescents, 1999-2000," *JAMA*, October 9, 2002. < <http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/vol288/issue14/index.dtl> >

^{iv} K. M. Venkat Narayan, MD; James P. Boyle, PhD; Theodore J. Thompson, MS; Stephen W. Sorensen, PhD; David F. Williamson, PhD, Lifetime Risk for Diabetes Mellitus in the United States, *JAMA*. 2003;290:1884-1890



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The HSC Foundation is dedicated to improving access to services for individuals with special needs who face challenging health care and social barriers. The Foundation has distinguished itself by its concern for and specialization in children's medical services and urban issues, particularly in the Washington metropolitan area. An important asset is the Foundation's connection to a working subacute hospital (The HSC Pediatric Center) and a care coordination health plan (Health Services for Children with Special Needs, Inc.) that have reputations of outstanding service to children and youth with disabilities and chronic illnesses. The Foundation serves as the parent organization to both of these nonprofit organizations.
