

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD OBESITY

A Report for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Topics:

1. Why youth are overweight
2. What prevention strategies will work
3. Actions youth are willing to take

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Report Background

In October 2003, the California Center was commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to prepare a “snap-shot” report on youths’ views on childhood obesity. The purpose of this report was to inform RWJF’s strategic planning in this area, especially investments to support engagement of youth themselves as leading agents for promising obesity prevention strategies. The report is divided into three sections:

- Section #1: Why Youth Are Overweight
- Section #2: What Prevention Strategies Will Work
- Section #3: Actions Youth Are Willing To Take

How We Collected the Information

Information in this report was collected primarily through focus groups and a survey conducted with a racially diverse group of 40 California high school students. An additional focus group was conducted with 12 middle school youth in Oakland, CA.

The 40 high school students were participants in a California Center program called “Youth-Full Government,” which this year engaged youth in their local governments’ obesity prevention efforts. The students assembled in Sacramento in January 2004, having traveled from the following ten communities:

- The Karuk Indian Tribe in rural northern California
- New immigrant communities in Santa Rosa, Fresno, and Santa Ynez
- Inner-city, African American and Latino neighborhoods in Richmond, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San Bernardino
- Regional coalitions in Irvine and San Diego

These youth provided the majority of the data presented in this report by going through the following four-day process:

- 1) On arrival, the teens participated in focus groups on causes of teen obesity. *The fact that these focus groups occurred on day-one is key* because it means the results were not influenced by subsequent briefings from experts. Information presented under the heading “**Focus Group Findings**” reflects the youths’ initial unbiased suggestions. (Results of the separate middle school focus group are also included.)
- 2) After the focus groups, the high school youth underwent a two-day research process that included interviews or briefings with 25 experts in obesity prevention.
- 3) After completing their research, the 40 youth held a group discussion and answered a survey on obesity prevention strategies. The survey presented a full range of strategies, including those already employed or considered by public health officials. Like the focus group findings, these **Survey Results** are presented in each of the three sections of this report.
- 4) Finally, the 40 youth developed “**Action Plans**” for addressing teen obesity in their communities. The development of these plans was not part of the California Center’s scope of work for RWJF, however we list them in the report for your reference.

Section #1:

WHY YOUTH ARE OVERWEIGHT

Focus Group Results

When asked why teens were becoming more overweight, youth made the following observations:

Teens lead busy, hectic lives and choose fast food/junk food because it can be prepared and eaten quickly. For older teens, the pace of high school life was the single greatest reason why they choose fast or pre-packaged foods over foods that may be healthier but take longer to prepare. When they get hungry, teens want to grab whatever will fill their stomachs quickly.

Teens do not have enough healthy and good tasting choices in their school's cafeteria. In all three focus groups, youth were unsatisfied with the food at school, which is why they ate lunch at nearby fast food restaurants.

Teens have limited opportunities to participate in sports or other physical activities. The youth reported that teen participation in sports is decreasing for several reasons, including:

- The diminishing quality of PE programs
- Favorite teen activities like watching TV and playing video games making it easy to develop the habit of doing nothing
- The lack of opportunities for exercise outside of PE (school-sponsored sports are becoming increasingly competitive, shutting out average players)

Teens find advertising for junk foods to be persuasive and pervasive. Teens feel bombarded by advertisements on the TV, radio, billboards, and even in their schools that encourage them to eat at certain restaurants or to buy certain foods. These foods come to mind first when they become hungry. More specifically, the youth felt that:

- Superstar endorsements were compelling, especially for younger teens
- Advertisements misrepresent what the food actually looks like and only show thin, healthy people eating it
- Older teens felt that advertisers prey on teens by equating eating at certain restaurants with belonging and personal well-being

Teens have a lack of adequate information about nutrition and healthy eating. Participants felt that youth do not have a nuanced view of what it means to be healthy, only a superficial understanding of the relationship between ingesting too many calories and gaining weight.

Teens are influenced by what they see their peers eating. When teens hang out, they often eat together, even if they aren't hungry. It appears that the pressure to conform to the norm is still present even though none felt they would be singled out or rejected for eating something different or nothing at all.

Teens are influenced by what they learn about food and nutrition from their parents. Teens agreed that youth eat what their parents give them when they are young, which informs later food choices. If parents don't set a good example, teens felt, then youth were not likely to eat healthy as they grew older.

Survey Results

Top Nine Causes of Childhood Obesity:

(Youth selected the following causes from a list of 24 options.)

1. Busy lives don't allow time for exercise or preparation of healthy foods.
2. Catchy advertisements and influential celebrities promote unhealthy foods.
3. School cafeterias don't provide healthy foods for students.
4. Bad role models. Adults in our lives don't eat healthy or get enough physical activity.
5. Fast food is cheap, and it just tastes so darn good.
6. Younger children are not encouraged to be active and eat healthy.
7. Family and cultural food traditions don't take into account calories and fat content.
8. Teens are stressed out, so they feel bad and don't take care of themselves.
9. Food products not well labeled, so it is hard to know what you are eating.

Section #2:

WHAT PREVENTION STRATEGIES WILL WORK

Focus Group Results

When asked what they thought might help youth develop healthier eating and exercise habits, teens made the following suggestions:

The key to changing the eating habits of teens is to educate them and their families. Teens felt that youth need basic information about health and nutrition in order to start making better choices about food and exercise. Many were quick to say that the information should help them make easy changes within the current structure of their fast-paced lifestyles. Youth felt the tone of the information should be serious while agreeing that, if done correctly, a funny message might be as effective as well.

Youth felt that any good campaign could change the following teen misperceptions:

- Healthy food tastes bad.
- Exercise is work.
- Teens don't have to worry about being unhealthy until they grow up.

Youth in all three focus groups felt that parents had a major role in teaching their children about good nutrition while they're young, and that it would be a good idea to focus public education activities on helping parents become better role models.

Other findings on what a public service campaign might look like included:

- A good campaign would employ intensive outreach strategies as well as create posters, pamphlets, and advertisement to disseminate the message.
- Celebrities, teens, and real people struggling with the effects of obesity would be compelling spokespeople. All agreed that teen health educators might have more pull with younger youth than with their immediate peers.

In addition to public information campaigns, there should be an emphasis on helping youth change habits in all areas of their lives. Projects youth thought would be the most successful follow.

Projects Targeting Youth and Their Families

- Create a fun, sustainable program to encourage families to take a walk or participate in at least one healthy activity together per week. (Some youth, particularly in the middle school group, thought that while parents might enjoy such a program, their kids probably would not.)
- Start a campaign to get families to eat together more. (Developing a cookbook with easy recipes families could prepare together might be helpful, particularly for younger teens.)
- Advocate for local governments to provide low-income families with coupons or vouchers that discount healthy foods at the grocery store like low-fat milk, bagels, fruits and vegetables, etc.

Projects Targeting Youth at School

- Start school clubs focused on healthy weight loss or create more opportunities for participation in non-competitive sports.
- Create a statewide standardized curriculum focused on nutrition and exercise. (Teens stressed that youth should be a part of any decision-making process.)
- Work with school staff to provide healthier options in the cafeteria and allow students to participate in food inspection.
- Advocate for an increase in PE funding and standards. (Many youth reported being troubled by cutbacks at their own schools.)
- Ban selling soda and candy at school. (This suggestion – posed by *some* older teens – was rejected by others including *all* the middle schoolers.)

Projects Targeting Youth in Their Communities

- Stage a civil action or public protest to raise awareness.
- Create a pamphlet that provides youth with a list of healthy snack/meal options available at favorite restaurants.
- Offer more nutrition and cooking classes at local community centers. (One youth suggested tying class attendance to receiving government benefits.)

Projects Targeting Youth at Work

- Urge supervisors to offer healthier foods in vending machines at work.
- Educate youth about the importance of bringing healthy snacks to work.

Survey Results

Interventions for Youth and Their Families

Ways to Promote Healthy Eating at Home

(Of 12 options, the youth ranked the following highest, in this order.)

1. Don't drink sugary drinks
2. Learn how to cook tasty, low fat foods at home.
3. Shop smarter, read the labels.
4. Minimize, don't super size (or take the extra home for lunch).
5. Maintain a calorie consumption and physical activity balance.
6. Support public policies (government action) that encourage healthy eating

Ways to Promote Physical Activity at Home

(Of 11 options, the youth ranked the following highest, in this order.)

1. Be a physically active role model for others.
2. Reduce your television and video games (or at least give them a rest).
3. Organize or participate in an activity or league for non-varsity athletes.
4. Organize a vigorous activity (like a scavenger hunt) for little kids.

Interventions for Youth at School

Ways to Promote Healthy Eating at School

(Of 12 options, the youth ranked the following highest, in this order.)

1. Adopt standards to improve the quality and nutrition of school meals.
2. Support student-run cafes, gardens, and festivals promoting healthy food.
3. Eliminate marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages on campus.
4. Have students educate peers, families and school officials.
5. Promote healthy eating at pre-schools to develop good eating early in life.

Ways to Promote Physical Activity at School

(Of 12 options, the youth ranked the following highest, in this order.)

1. Create fun physical activities (dance, aerobics, non-varsity leagues).
2. Promote physical activity in pre-school and kindergarten to encourage life-long enjoyment of physical activity.
3. Make school facilities and fields open after school and on weekends.
4. Increase and improve training for physical education teachers.
5. Encourage field trips and on-campus learning that involve physical activity.
6. Support student designed and led physical activity programs

Interventions for Youth in the Community

Ways Promote Healthy Eating in the Community

(Of 10 options, the youth ranked the following highest, in this order.)

1. Teach people how to make traditional cultural recipes in a healthier manner.
2. Create coalitions including youth, citizens, health providers, and officials to develop strategic plans to promote healthy eating and physical activity.
3. Develop partnerships to pursue foundation or government grants to support programs that encourage healthy eating and physical activity.
4. Organize a pool of volunteers willing to teach or lead activities that promote physical activity or healthy eating.

Ways to Promote Physical Activity in the Community

(Of 11 options, the youth ranked the following highest, in this order.)

1. Create coalitions including youth, educators, citizens, health providers and government officials to develop strategic plans to promote healthy eating and physical activity.
2. Develop partnerships to pursue foundation or government grants to support programs that encourage healthy eating and physical activity.
3. Develop an advertising campaign with signs, helpful hints, on-air messages, and internet advertising that encourages healthy eating and physical activity
4. Create “violence-free” or safe family exercise zones in parks and neighborhoods.

Interventions for Youth at Work

Ways to Promote Healthy Eating at Work

1. Provide healthy foods in workplace cafeterias, vending machines, and meetings.
2. Subsidize employee membership to exercise facilities.
3. Provide gift certificates for healthy food as a bonus for employees.

Ways to Promote Physical Activity at Work

1. Develop a policy supporting employee physical activity and healthy food.
2. Promote or establish activity breaks during long meetings or as daily options.
3. Build safe outdoor exercise areas such as walking, running, and biking paths.

Section #3:

WHAT ACTIONS YOUTH ARE WILLING TO TAKE

Focus Group Results

Youth in the focus groups liked the idea of working on many projects presented in the previous section. They had the following additional suggestions:

To get youth involved, the project must be fun, fast-paced, and provide youth with opportunities to learn. They also thought that if youth knew more about the consequences of obesity, they might get involved more willingly.

In order to ensure long-term participation in a project, all the youth felt that teens would need to be paid. Youth felt financial compensation would better ensure long-term participation. Some thought that “community service hours” or the possibility of extra credit might motivate teens as well.

Specific activities the youth thought they might do well included:

- Making presentations at schools about nutrition issues for teens.
- Writing, producing, or acting in a public service announcement for TV.
- Distributing materials in school about nutrition and physical exercise.
- Planning and participating in a civil action or public protest. (Older youth were more interested in this activity.)
- Giving a speech before the school board or city council, talking to a principal or other school administrator, or meeting one-on-one with someone in local government like the mayor or a councilmember. (These activities appealed to older youth only.)

Supplemental Information: Youth Action Plans

Teens at the Youth-Full Government conference submitted local action plans at the end of conference. The list below, provided to offer context for how youth can be involved in obesity prevention policy, reflects goals for the next year. Youth groups will be:

- **Educating youth and their families.** Five of the groups (Fresno, Karuk, Redlands, Santa Rosa, and Santa Ynez) plan to implement public education campaigns on healthy eating and physical activity.

- **Creating fun opportunities for youth to exercise.** One of the groups (Redlands) chose to focus on physical activity.
- **Decreasing the amount of advertising found on school campuses trying to sell youth unhealthy food.** Two of the groups (San Diego and Fresno) chose this project.
- **Working to design a nutrition unit for health class and create new standards for physical education.** One group (Fresno) chose this project, as well as conducting a needs assessment among their peers in order to inform administrators on what youth want.
- **Advocating for schools and workplaces to provide healthier foods and, at school, to allow students to participate in food inspection.** One group (Redlands) chose this project.

Conclusion

The above findings present a wide range of prevention strategies for teen obesity, as well as excellent support for the idea that young people are willing and qualified to contribute to policy decisions affecting their health.

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