



Background Information

The Challenge: Preventing and reversing overweight among American children

Overweight and obesity among American children -- the incidence of which has tripled over the past 20 years -- is recognized as a serious and growing health and economic issue. Most overweight children have at least one medical complication, such as Type II diabetes, gallbladder disease, asthma or sleep apnea. Annual obesity-associated hospital costs among youths between the ages of 6 and 17 have increased from \$35 million during 1979-81 to \$127 million during 1997-1999.

Research indicates that overweight adolescents have a 70 to 80 percent chance of becoming obese adults. That means today's heavy kids, who already have to contend with the negative psychosocial effects of being overweight -- depression, anxiety disorders and isolation from their peers -- most likely will suffer the dire health consequences of adult obesity, including diabetes, coronary heart disease and hypertension.

The causes of childhood overweight and obesity -- increasingly sedentary lifestyles and over-consumption of high-calorie foods and beverages -- are no mystery. But getting kids away from their televisions and computer screens is difficult for many reasons, from lack of adult supervision and role models to unsafe neighborhoods. With "super size" portions of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods being cheap, accessible at all times and easy to eat on the fly, trying to persuade children to eat according to the Food Guide Pyramid becomes a daunting challenge.

Our Response: Working with children in their schools

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) -- a nationwide initiative with leadership provided by former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, MD, PhD, (AFHK founding chair) and applauded by current Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona -- is rising to this challenge. Formed in the fall of 2002 following a national summit in Washington, D.C., for which First Lady Laura Bush served as Honorary Chairperson, Action for Healthy Kids is an integrated, national-state effort addressing childhood obesity by focusing on changes in the school environment.

This effort includes a partnership of 40 national organizations, industry and government agencies representing education, physical activity, health and nutrition -- such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Education. In addition to providing ongoing guidance, these organizations contributed to the development of the October 2002 national Healthy Schools Summit, as well as to the formation of 51 State Teams.

Action for Healthy Kids has a clear set of goals. In the near term, it is working to increase the number of health-promoting schools that support sound nutrition and physical activity. This is aimed at slowing the rate of increase and decreasing the degree of overweight among American children. In the long term, AFHK aims to play a key role in preventing childhood overweight and obesity nationwide.

To achieve these goals, Action for Healthy Kids has three main thrusts:

- Improving schoolchildren's eating habits by increasing access to nutritious food and beverages on school grounds, while decreasing access to high-calorie, low-nutrient options, as well as by integrating nutrition education into the curriculum for all schoolchildren.
- Increasing schoolchildren's physical activity through physical education courses, recess, the integration of physical activity into academic classes, after school and co-curricular fitness programs.
- Educating administrators, educators, students, and parents about the role of sound nutrition and physical activity in academic achievement.

School-based efforts represent the best opportunity to promote American children's current and future well-being -- both physical and economic -- because long experience indicates that healthy behavior and academic achievement are mutually reinforcing: Students who take care of their health tend to perform better academically than students who do not, and students whose academic achievement is above average tend to take better care of their health.

One Size Doesn't Fit All: A state-based approach

Made up of school administrators, educators, health professionals and other committed individuals, 51 Action for Healthy Kids State Teams are implementing a variety of creative interventions at the grassroots level to promote sound nutrition and physical activity throughout the school environment. Drawing on "Commitment to Change" -- the initiative's guiding document, which was adapted from the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity* -- each team has developed an action plan that is appropriate for its own state's educational system, culture and resources. For instance:

- The Alabama Team conducted a school vending machine survey with 1,400 school principals. The team used the results to help develop a "Guide to Healthy Vending," which it distributed to all principals in the state.
- The Delaware Team is working to provide staff training on how to test students' physical fitness in order to ensure that 50% of students show an improvement on physical fitness tests by 2004-05. The team has also provided grants to 6 schools to improve school meal programs and physical activity opportunities.
- The Indiana Team is providing all superintendents with a position paper summarizing the relationship between recess and academic performance, and a resource kit of selected before/after school activities and nutrition programs. The team is recruiting schools to offer and promote fruits/vegetables and low-fat/non-fat dairy products, and it is officially recognizing schools through a Healthy Hoosier Award Program.
- The Texas Team is working to ensure that the majority of Texas school districts have a school health advisory council responsible for making recommendations and monitoring nutrition and physical activity programs within the district. The team also is working to ensure school district accountability in support of the coordinated school health requirements identified in Texas.
- The Kansas Team has awarded 13 mini-grants to school teams that have developed strategies for improving choices of healthy foods and beverages on campus, and for increasing physical activity during and after school.

The Action for Healthy Kids national organization supports and accelerates state action plans by developing shared resources, facilitating the exchange of information and experts among teams, and by raising public awareness of their efforts, among other activities. The national organization also evaluates state-based efforts to identify and disseminate best practices -- further enhancing the efficacy and impact of this coordinated, but customized, effort.

For more information, please visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

Members of the Action for Healthy Kids board of directors provide expertise and oversight to AFHK, a non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) status. Alicia Moag-Stahlberg, MS, RD, a nationally recognized authority in the field of nutrition and communications, serves as the organization's executive director. The National Dairy Council, National Foot Ball League and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have provided funding for Action for Healthy Kids.