



Childhood Obesity

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to tackling **the epidemic** of childhood obesity, one of the most **urgent threats** to our nation's health and prosperity.



Our goal is to reverse the epidemic by 2015—to see a sustained decline in childhood obesity rates, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Today more than 23 million children and adolescents are either obese or overweight, putting them at increased risk for heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, asthma and other serious—even life-threatening—illnesses. Some experts warn that, if obesity rates continue to climb, the current generation of children could be the first in U.S. history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.

RWJF's strategy for reversing the epidemic is to support changes to public policies and community environments that promote healthy eating and physical activity. We focus on five approaches that research shows are likely to have the greatest impact: providing healthier foods to students at school; improving the availability of healthy foods in all households; increasing the frequency, intensity and duration of physical activity at school; improving access to safe places where children can play; and limiting television screen time. We place special emphasis on reaching children at greatest risk for obesity: African-American, Latino, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander children and children living in low-income communities.

In the spring of 2008 the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics released the first **data** to suggest that the nation may be turning the corner on the obesity epidemic. Findings of the latest National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey indicate that the prevalence of childhood obesity was essentially unchanged from 2003–2004 to 2005–2006. Although it's too soon to know if this marks the beginning of a meaningful downward trend, the apparent stabilization of childhood obesity rates is good news. However, we must recognize that



overall rates of childhood obesity are still far too high and that the crisis continues to worsen among certain racial and ethnic groups.

The stabilization reported by the CDC coincided with a period in which childhood obesity emerged as a major national concern. RWJF has been instrumental in raising this awareness and prompting action. We helped sound the alarm bell in 2004 by hosting a national summit with *TIME* magazine and ABC News, where 400 health experts, food industry executives, government officials, other stakeholders and members of the media reviewed the latest research and agreed on the need to focus efforts on preventing obesity among children.

That same year, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued a seminal report, supported in part by RWJF, that emphasized the need to change policies and environments to help children to be physically active and eat a healthy diet. RWJF has since been working with a diverse set of organizations and funding partners to give children these opportunities.

For example, we supported The Food Trust, an organization that successfully brought supermarkets to underserved communities in Pennsylvania, to adapt its approach for use in other states. The Foundation currently is supporting The Food Trust's efforts in Louisiana, Illinois and New Jersey.

We also began working with schools to ensure children had the opportunity to eat healthy foods and be physically active during the school day. In 2006 RWJF provided the initial funding for the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program, which aims to create healthier school environments for students and staff. In 2007 RWJF substantially expanded the program in states where rates of obesity are highest. The program now reaches more than 4,000 schools—and more than 2,000,000 students—through in-person and online support.

In addition to promising on-the-ground programs, RWJF has invested in major research initiatives to help communities identify the most effective obesity-prevention interventions. For example, Arkansas garnered national attention in 2003 after enacting the landmark obesity-prevention law known as Act 1220. The Arkansas program was controversial, especially for its inclusion of BMI screening of students. RWJF funded an independent evaluation of efforts to implement the law, which found no negative side effects such as increases in dieting or weight-based teasing. As a result, states around the nation saw that BMI monitoring could be an effective part of a school-based obesity prevention program.

Because we seek to focus sustained attention on these and other policy approaches to reversing our nation's obesity epidemic, RWJF sponsors the widely disseminated "F as



in Fat” report put out by the Trust for America’s Health. This annual report takes a comprehensive look at the problem, as well as federal, state, local and industry moves to address it.

We are pleased that the latest CDC numbers suggest that this work may be yielding positive results, but we also are cautious not to over-interpret any single study. Moreover, we must continue pushing for a true reversal of rates—not just a stabilization—that benefits all groups of children.

To achieve this ultimate goal, RWJF launched several ambitious programs in 2008:

- The new Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity will provide national leadership and coordination for the field.
- *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*, one of our largest community-action initiatives ever, announced its nine leading sites and released a call for proposals to fund approximately 60 more. All will focus on policy and environmental changes to transform their communities.
- *Communities Creating Healthy Environments* will work within communities of color to support effective, culturally competent policy initiatives to address childhood obesity at the local level.
- The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University will examine child-targeted food marketing, with a goal of shifting industry practices toward supporting healthier diets for youth.
- The IOM Standing Committee on Childhood Obesity Prevention will monitor efforts and make timely recommendations to inform our nation’s progress.

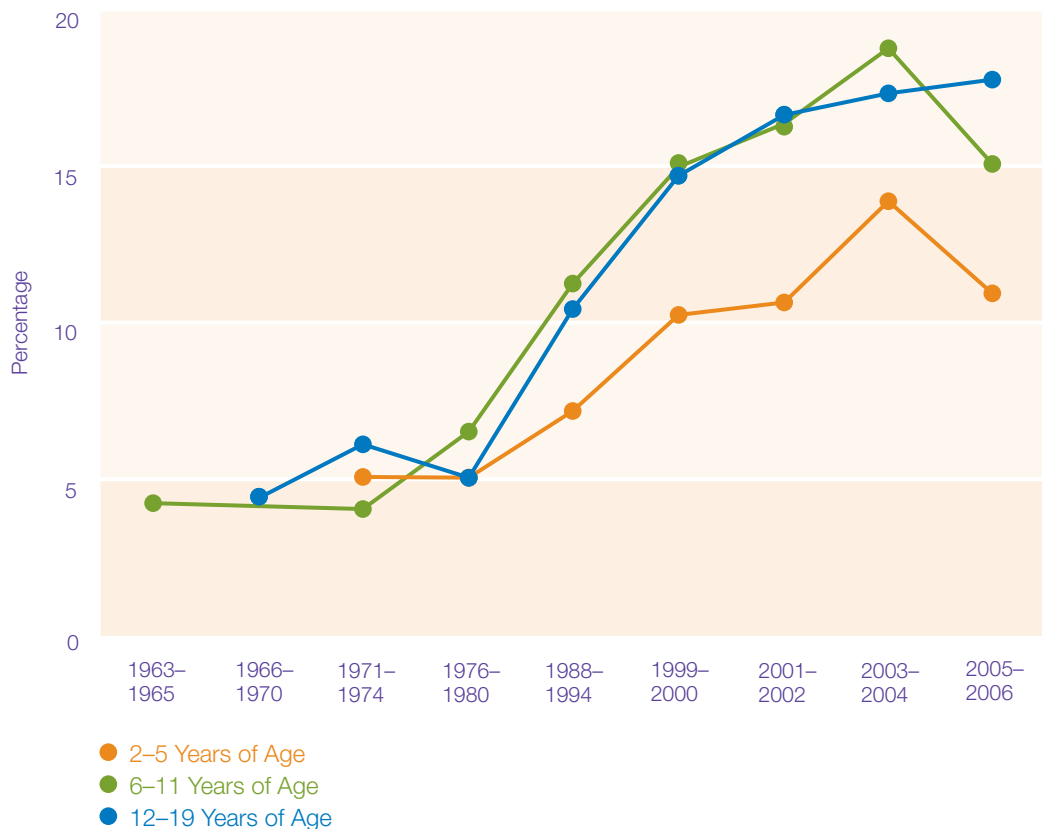
As this new work gains traction, our established programs and alliances will continue to push ahead. Fueled by the urgency of the issue and the conviction of the individuals involved, we expect these efforts to show the way for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by our 2015 goal.

For additional information about our initiatives and objectives, visit

www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity.



Trends in Child and Adolescent Overweight*



* Overweight is defined as Body Mass Index \geq gender- and weight-specific 95th percentile from the 2000 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Growth Charts.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. *National Health Examination Surveys II (ages 6-11) and III (ages 12-17)*, and *National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys I, II and III*, and 1999-2006.