



childhood obesity



July 2009 | www.rwjf.org

For the most current information on our strategy, please visit our Web site at www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is committed to tackling one of today's most urgent threats to the health of our children and families—childhood obesity. Our goal is to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015.

We need to restore “energy balance” in children's lives, so they aren't taking in more calories than they burn. To do that, we have to change the environments in which we live.

Our strategy is to change public policies and local environments in ways that make *all* communities healthier. We place special emphasis on reaching children at greatest risk: black, Latino, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian-American and Pacific Islander children, as well as children living in lower-income communities.

We focus on advancing policy changes that the latest research suggests will result in children consuming more *healthy* foods and beverages and fewer *unhealthy* foods and beverages. At the same time, we encourage policies that result in increased physical activity in schools and communities and decreased sedentary time.

THE PROBLEM

During the past four decades, obesity rates have soared among all age groups, increasing more than four-fold among children ages 6 to 11. Today, nearly a third of children and adolescents are

overweight or obese. That's more than 23 million kids and teenagers.

In addition, significant disparities exist. For example, 38 percent of Mexican-American children and 34.9

percent of black children ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with 30.7 percent of white children in the same age range. There are also significant disparities in terms of access to healthy food and safe places to play. A study of more than 200 neighborhoods found four times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods as in black neighborhoods. And communities with high levels of poverty are significantly less likely to have places where people can be physically active, such as parks, green spaces, and bike paths and lanes.

If we don't act to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, we're in danger of raising the first generation of American children who may live sicker and die younger than the generation before them. Preventing obesity during childhood is critical, because habits that last into adulthood frequently are formed during youth. Research shows that an obese older teenager has up to an 80 percent chance of becoming an obese adult.

Overweight and obese children are at higher risk than their healthy-weight peers for a host of serious illnesses,



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including heart disease, stroke, asthma and certain types of cancer. Obese children already are being diagnosed with health problems previously considered to be “adult” illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

Obesity also poses a tremendous financial threat to our economy and our health care system. It's estimated that the obesity epidemic costs our nation \$117 billion per year in direct medical expenses and indirect costs, including lost productivity. Childhood obesity alone carries a huge price tag—up to \$14 billion per year in direct health care costs.

By reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity, we will make our nation healthier, save countless lives, increase economic productivity for the next generation of American workers and ease the tremendous financial strain on our health care system caused by obesity-related illnesses.

WHAT CAUSES CHILDHOOD OBESITY?

In the simplest terms, childhood obesity results from energy imbalance—children consuming more calories than they burn through physical activity and normal growth.

The latest research shows that the environments we live in and the public policies our leaders enact directly impact the foods our children eat and how much activity they get. When schools have healthy foods and beverages in their cafeterias and vending machines, students eat better. When communities have parks and bike trails in their neighborhoods and vigorous physical education programs in their schools, children are more active. When neighborhoods have supermarkets and farmers' markets that sell affordable healthy foods, families eat more nutritiously. But when communities are dominated by fast food, with few places to play, our children eat worse and are less active, and their health suffers. And we all pay a price—in higher health care costs and lost economic productivity.

WHAT WE FUND

RWJF funds efforts at the community, state and federal level to change public policies and local environments in ways that promote increased physical activity and improved nutrition for children—both of which are critical to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic. In particular, we focus on five broad approaches the evidence suggests will have

the greatest and longest-lasting impact on our children. These approaches can be supported by many specific policy or environmental changes. Several are listed below, but these are only examples—there are many promising ways to achieve success. The five approaches are:

1. **Providing only healthy foods and beverages to students at school.** Junk food has no place in our schools. Education leaders can improve nutrition by ensuring that all foods and beverages offered meet or exceed federal dietary guidelines, whether they're served in cafeterias; sold in vending machines, school stores or through fundraisers; or given away as treats or rewards in classrooms.

To help promote healthier foods and increased physical activity in schools, RWJF has supported the Healthy Schools Program since its inception. The program is an initiative of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a partnership between the American Heart Association and William J. Clinton Foundation. As part of its comprehensive approach to help educators make their schools healthier places to learn and work, the Alliance brokered an agreement with the

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American Beverage Association and the nation's top three beverage companies to reduce sugar-sweetened beverages in schools. This agreement achieved a 58 percent decrease in beverage calories shipped to schools in just two years.

In 2007, the Foundation funded a multimillion-dollar expansion of the program to target states with the highest rates of obesity.

2. Increasing the frequency, intensity and duration of physical activity at school.

States and school districts can increase students' physical activity by requiring daily physical education and by changing the physical education curriculum to ensure that all students are active participants. Some schools have found creative ways to add physical activity throughout the day—in classes, during recess and even when moving from one classroom to another.

In addition to our work with the Healthy Schools Program, the Foundation supports several initiatives working to increase physical activity in schools. Studies from *Active Living Research* are building the evidence base about the importance of physical activity and identifying which policies and programs

are most effective. Our *Bridging the Gap* research program is studying how school wellness policies have been implemented, including how schools have integrated physical activity into their plans.

3. Increasing the availability of affordable healthy foods in all communities.

Local governments can increase access to nutritious foods by supporting farmers' markets and working in partnership with the business community to bring new grocery stores to underserved areas. Federal and state governments also can play an important role by reforming food assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to introduce incentives that encourage participants to buy healthier foods and beverages.

The Foundation is working closely with The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food. The Food Trust has achieved tremendous success in bringing supermarkets back to underserved communities in Pennsylvania, and we're working together to replicate

those results in other states. We've also launched *Communities Creating Healthy Environments* to build local advocacy capacity to address the needs of communities of color. A key focus of the program is reducing inequities in access to affordable healthy foods.

4. Improving access to safe places where children can play.

Communities can create opportunities for physical activity by building new parks and playgrounds and improving those that already exist. Other promising strategies include increasing after-school and weekend access to school playgrounds and athletic facilities and improving safety in parks or other places where children gather to play.

In 2008, the Foundation launched *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*, our largest community action initiative ever. The program supports local efforts to reshape community environments and provides expert guidance to help local leaders develop strategies that achieve long-lasting change. *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* targets communities at highest risk for obesity on the basis of race/ethnicity, income and geographic location.



RWJF's strategy for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic hinges on changing policies, environments and social norms.

5. **Limiting screen time.** When children spend less time in front of a television screen, they see fewer advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages, eat less junk food and have more time to be active. Schools can help their students limit screen time by implementing curricula like Stanford's Student Media Awareness to Reduce Television (SMART), and child-care centers and preschools can start their children on a healthier path by eliminating the use of television altogether.

The Foundation currently is exploring approaches to reducing the amount of time children spend in front of a television. We also support research to better understand how screen time and food marketing affect children, particularly those at greatest risk for obesity. With RWJF support, both the African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network and the Yale University Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity are working to better understand the risks of excessive screen time and explore creative approaches to limiting the marketing of unhealthy food products to children.

The Foundation also supports efforts to engage leaders at all levels of government. *Leadership for Healthy Communities* educates state and local

leaders nationwide about ways to create healthier, more vibrant communities and prevent childhood obesity through public policies that support active living and healthy eating. The National Governors Association's Healthy Kids, Healthy America program encourages creativity and collaboration among different departments, agencies and sectors to advance governors' efforts to prevent childhood obesity in 15 states.

Launched in early 2009, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity works to shape and coordinate the efforts of organizations, policy-makers and communities throughout the country, with the goal of building a national movement to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015. Working with many outstanding partners, the center aims to:

- synthesize the science and best available evidence on childhood obesity to ensure that prevention policies and activities are built on what works;
- educate policy-makers and advocates about which national, state, regional and local policies are most effective in preventing childhood obesity, especially in the communities most severely impacted;

- develop capacity and leadership in the movement to prevent childhood obesity; and
- build public will to reverse the epidemic.

The programs described in this document are only a sampling of the Foundation's efforts to prevent childhood obesity. For a full list of programs, visit www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity.

WHAT WE DON'T FUND

RWJF's strategy for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic hinges on changing policies, environments and social norms. Therefore, we generally do not support projects that provide only information or education. Because our emphasis is on preventing obesity, we do not invest in research regarding medical or surgical treatment of obesity. In keeping with Foundation policy, we give preference to proposals developed by public agencies and tax-exempt organizations.

RWJF does not accept unsolicited proposals for its work to prevent childhood obesity. We issue specific solicitations for proposals and ideas periodically throughout the year. If you are registered to receive funding alerts through the Foundation's Web site at www.rwjf.org, you will receive e-mail notices of each funding opportunity.