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Improving childhood health and wellness

Childhood obesity is a serious issue throughout the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity affects one in five young people nationwide. As of 2017, the prevalence of obesity is 18.5%, affecting approximately 13.7 million children and adolescents. With chronic diseases being the leading causes of morbidity and mortality among adults, research has linked engaging in healthy behaviors, such as participating in physical activity and eating nutritious foods, with aiding in disease prevention. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has stated that promoting and establishing healthy behaviors for young people is more effective — and usually easier — than attempting to alter unhealthy behaviors in adults. Since children learn food preferences while they are young, research shows it is important to promote the acceptance of healthier foods in early childhood. Land-grant universities are working with young people to encourage physical activity and nutrition at a young age, promoting healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

Here are a few examples of the work these universities are doing:

- Extension educators in **California** train teachers, parents, and youths about food resource management, physical activity and nutrition. During the 2019-2020 school year, a group of 32 students in migrant farmworker families received nearly 100 hours of structured physical activity, doubling their weekly average of time spent exercising. In a similar initiative at another school, 469 students received instruction on physical activity, healthy eating and good food habits. Of the participating teachers, 84% reported that students can now identify healthy food choices, 74% strongly agreed that more students are willing to try new foods at school and 100% strongly agreed that more students now wash their hands more often before handling food.
- Extension educators in **California** also developed a peer mentor program at their school garden to promote healthy habits, providing older students with leadership roles to serve as ambassadors to younger students and lead them through garden lessons. Students remained focused on program content and assisted in each other's learning. As a result, teachers did not need to expend their class time

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Nutrition and Health

managing behavioral issues and instead more fully explored curriculum content and activities. This collaboration resulted in the garden growing from five to 18 garden boxes for garden-enhanced nutrition education, and the school was able to engage 371 students in the garden throughout the school year. The space has also been used as a quiet zone for mindfulness exercises and as an area for socializing.

- Researchers in **Illinois** are linking parent-child relationships to children's health and well-being. Work to date has tied parental response to children's emotions during mealtimes to food consumption and the risk for obesity. For example, when parents respond to a child's negative emotions with controlling and non-responsive feeding practices, their children are more likely to consume less vegetables and eat more energy-dense foods. Additionally, distractions during meals, such as television and cell phones, often result in parents using more controlling feeding practices and children in turn consuming less healthy foods. This ongoing research could strengthen family relationships while also encouraging healthier eating habits.
 - **North Dakota** Extension educators conducted a Kids Cooking School, held virtually in 2020, with nearly 30 young people completing a month-long program that taught them about ingredient measuring, reading a recipe, identifying and using kitchen equipment, safe food handling, nutrition and hands-on cooking and baking. At the end of the program, 96% reported increased knowledge in food safety and how to follow a recipe. "She loves to cook," said a parent of a program participant, "and this program encouraged her to try new cooking techniques."
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