

Afterschool Afterschool and Childhood Obesity:

Two Case Studies

Second in a Series

COMBATING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS,
THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL
AND THE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS INITIATIVE:
TWO CASE STUDIES

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FITNESS 4 LIFE, PAJARO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL
DISTRICT
RURAL CENTRAL VALLEY COAST



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Introduction

Among the millions of children and young people in our communities, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles cause serious health issues, lower self-esteem, lead to social and psychological problems and contribute to poor academic performance. Overweight is the most common health problem facing children today, and it has reached epidemic proportions. It ranks as the public's #1 concern for children in the United States, ahead of drugs, alcohol and gangs, and is the focus of First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* campaign.

Although childhood obesity crosses all socioeconomic lines, children living in poverty are disproportionately affected. It is all too common for families with limited financial resources to sacrifice the quality of food for quantity and to consume large amounts of food when it is available to compensate for times when it is not. Easy access to high concentrations of fast food chains and corner markets compounds the problem. And, unsafe neighborhoods make it difficult, if not impossible, for children to get the exercise they need to be healthy. All of this contributes to the likelihood that they will become overweight.

If these patterns continue into adulthood, one in every three children born in 2000 and one in every two children of color is likely to develop type 2 diabetes in his or her lifetime. This, and other medical issues, will lead to an unprecedented rate of premature death and disability, diminished workplace productivity and staggering financial repercussions for families, insurers, healthcare providers and our society.

As devastating as this is, we know that children who develop healthy eating habits and are physically active at an early age are much more likely to be well and stay well. We also know that barriers to this happening are shared among the community as a whole – and that when these barriers are lowered or removed, changes in individual behavior become more achievable and sustainable. The socio-ecological model makes a compelling case that the most effective route to healthy behaviors comes through a combination of efforts at all levels – individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and public policy.

There is a growing body of evidence that comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to be a driving force in this effort. Through a combination of federal, state and local funding, these programs already reach almost a million low-income children in California and many more across the nation. Building on this platform makes sense. It can be done at minimal cost to taxpayers and pay huge dividends.

Comprehensive afterschool programs are uniquely well-positioned to combat childhood obesity in ways that are fiscally prudent, socially responsible and politically appealing.

California's Healthy Behaviors Initiative offers a prime example of how this can happen. Funded by the *Network for a Healthy California* (a division of the California Department of Public Health), the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and The California

Endowment, the Center for Collaborative Solutions has spent the last five years developing exemplary practices in nutrition and physical activity, vetting them with experts and field testing them in 10 multi-site afterschool programs serving over 75,000 elementary and middle school students. Located in inner cities, metropolitan areas and rural communities throughout the state, these programs now offer regional Healthy Behaviors Learning Centers and provide support to many other programs. Two of these programs are included in these case studies. They offer examples of the approaches that are being used, the changes that are taking place in children's eating habits and physical fitness levels, and the impact that this initiative is capable of having throughout the United States.

MT. DIABLO CARES Bay Area

Located in low-income neighborhoods in Central and East Contra Costa County, the Collaborative for Academics, Recreation and Enrichment for Students (CARES) program is a unique partnership among the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, the Ambrose Recreation and Parks District, the City of Concord and Bay Area Community Resources (BACR). Serving a largely Latino and African-American population that has been severely impacted by the economic downturn, CARES has made huge inroads into addressing food security issues by establishing remarkable community and site-based gardens and partnering with a local food bank to provide literally hundreds of tons of fresh fruits and vegetables to children and families in need. In recognition of its work and the difference it has made, the program received the 2010 Governor's Spotlight Award Silver Medal (and \$2,500) and was awarded first place in the regional Governor's Challenge for Physical Activity in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors

CARES holds a powerful a vision of children changing the world through their own actions and their impact on their peers, families and communities. To bring this vision into reality, the program approaches its work with laser-sharp intentionality, demonstrating how committed the leadership team has been to removing influences that make it difficult for children to improve their health and well-being, and how successful it has been in replacing these with healthy alternatives. A zero tolerance policy for junk food on its campuses is just one of many examples of how this program has raised the bar. Although not everyone agreed with the policy in the beginning, widespread support now exists.

In addition, students are learning more about why it's so important to eat well to be well. They attend nutrition classes five hours a week. Each session emphasizes the social and emotional aspects of healthy behaviors and provides hands-on learning experiences that include

A zero tolerance for junk food policy has raised the bar in the program's promotion of healthy eating campaign.

An increasing number of children are reaching their targeted healthy fitness zones in one or more categories of California's FITNESSGRAM tests.

cooking, gardening, fresh fruits and vegetables tastings and snacks. Their research-based curricula, Farm to Fork and The Power of Choice, are supplemented with Nutrition to Grow On, *Children's Power Play!*, *Reading Across My Pyramid*, *Harvest of the Month* newsletters and the Dairy Council's *Deal Me In* materials. Even the youngest children know how to read product labels – and they have a strong sense of why it's important to make decisions that enhance rather than inhibit their health and well-being.

The program ensures that students engage in 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day by using CATCH and SPARK curricula, and KidTribe and Geo Mats supplemental resources. Providing these opportunities is paying off. At Riverview Middle School Healthy Behaviors Learning Center, 59 percent of the seventh grade students reached the healthy fitness zone in all six of the state-mandated FITNESSGRAM categories.

Keenly aware of the importance of continuing to support children during the months when school is not in session, CARES expanded their summer program to operate six hours a day for six weeks in 2010. In addition to providing its regular academic, enrichment and recreational programming, 50,382 breakfasts and 63,459 lunches were served last year alone. By partnering with the Contra Costa County Department of Health in the summer *Rethink Your Drink* campaign, students had access to and consumed much more water than would have otherwise been the case. And, they had the opportunity to visit a local farmers' market and swim at a local water park once a week.

The benefits are evident in several ways, not the least of which is the impact on students' performance in school. Children are attending school more regularly, and doing better when they're there.

- The majority of those with a grade of C or lower in the fall increased their performance by at least one grade, and often more.
- Classroom teachers reported that 90 percent of the students who attended the program showed improvement in their confidence in learning, 71 percent strengthened their leadership skills and more than three-quarters were more attentive during their classes.
- Eight out of 10 students reported that CARES helped them develop their social and emotional skills, stay out of trouble and make better choices.

Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships

Unlike many other afterschool programs, CARES has a staff retention rate of 83 percent, an exceptionally high level. This has proven to be an important factor in the program's success. In large part, it is attributable to the vision and passion of the leadership team, the support the staff receives and the degree to which everyone shares a commitment to a common purpose in improving students' health and well-being.

Staff members receive 35 hours of formal training annually *and* ongoing on-site coaching and mentoring. Workshop topics include cooking in the classroom and garden-enhanced nutrition education. Research-based curricula support learning in physical activity. Staff members take what they learn to heart in their own personal lives as well as in the work they do with children and young people. Most are physically active outside of the program, and many participate in local football and basketball leagues.

Because staff members typically live in the neighborhoods where the program's sites are located, they are intimately familiar with the challenges that make it difficult, if not impossible, for children to eat well or to get the exercise they need to be healthy. Very few parks exist, and where they do, they're often unsafe. Parents are typically not in a financial position to support their children taking lessons or participating in activities such as martial arts or tennis or dance – all of which are accessible to more affluent members of surrounding areas. The program not only provides students with safe opportunities for physical activity and sports five days a week, it also results in staff taking advantage of the time to be active themselves, as well as to support children and young people in what they are doing.

The CARES leadership team and staff clearly understand the challenges families face. They know how serious the issue of food security is, especially under the current economic conditions. With unemployment at more than 21 percent, generally low wages and the comparatively high prices of fresh fruits and vegetables, families often don't have enough to eat, much less the financial means to purchase healthy foods. Compounding this, the majority of children in the program are Latino and African-American, the two groups most vulnerable to childhood overweight and obesity, and the most likely to acquire type 2 diabetes as a result.

CARES is doing something about this – in a big way! Through its partnership with the Contra Costa and Solano County Food Bank, hundreds of tons of fresh produce have been delivered to the program's sites for the past three years. Fresh fruits and vegetables are available during the program, and children are given bags of fruits and vegetables to take home to their families. Site directors also attend Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—CalFresh in California, formerly Food Stamps) trainings offered by the food bank and the Contra Costa County Health Department. Parent outreach strategies provide information about how to access SNAP benefits and other services, and baskets of healthy food are routinely raffled off at Family Nights. Attendance at the program's annual Sports Banquet is at full capacity. And families report an increase in the use of healthy program-generated recipes at home.

Although the program focuses primarily on elementary school students, it also includes meaningful opportunities for middle and high school students. Middle school volunteers, many of whom were formerly program participants, inspire younger children to be more physically active and serve as positive role models. The forty-nine high school students who participated in the Teen Garden Corps Program this year are especially effective in encouraging children to change their eating habits.

Middle school volunteers and high school members of the Teen Garden Corps are making a real difference in younger children's lives.

Every Teen Garden Corps participant receives a \$500 stipend and community service credit, and is guaranteed a position in the program after completion of the initial work. Fifteen of the Garden Corps graduates now work in paid jobs as Recreation Specialists and oversee garden projects (which now exist at every one of the program's

18 schools), providing younger children with ongoing opportunities to taste a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and use fresh produce in their cooking classes. Their influence has proven to play a major role in changing the eating habits of younger students in the program.

Promoting Positive Organizational Environments

Over the years, CARES has developed strong, positive relationships with schools, garnered the support of principals and teachers, and created close ties with food service managers. These efforts have paid huge dividends. Kitchens with full refrigerators are available for use in afterschool cooking classes and for storage, and mobile kitchens are now available at every site. Staff members are trained by food service personnel in food handling and safety. And, largely because of the program's efforts, salad bars are up and running at two elementary school sites. At one of these, the amount of produce consumed in school lunches doubled in the first three months of the salad bar! There will be two more starting up this year.

CARES' exceptionally strong partnership with schools is a major reason for its ability to make a real difference in children's eating habits.

Like most programs, daily snacks are provided by the school district, but with one major difference. The staff is given the opportunity to choose from a variety of options and makes the decisions based on children's expressed preferences at each site. In addition, through the support of the California Department of Education's Instructional School Garden Program, all sites now have gardens, and students have access to fresh fruits and vegetables as part of their snacks and cooking and nutrition classes. CARES also takes the lead in providing school-wide events and assemblies, including a Health Fair and a Nutrition Decathlon; celebrates National Nutrition Month; and ensures that posters sending healthy eating messages are displayed in the cafeteria and on the campus.

Promoting Positive Community Environments

CARES is actively involved in the communities it serves and works hard to influence changes that go well beyond the afterschool hours and the physical sites where the program is located. A member of its leadership team is part of the local food bank's Food and Nutrition Consortium, the Contra Costa Child Care Coalition for Activity and Nutrition, and the Afterschool 4 All Alliance. The number of partnerships that have been, and continue to be, developed is testimony to the program's emphasis on collaboration. These collaborative partners include the *Bay Area Network for a Healthy California*, the Contra Costa County Public Health's NEW (Nutrition, Exercise and Wellness) Kids Program, the City of Concord, Kaiser Permanente, Diablo Valley College, the University of California Cooperative Extension, Junior Achievement and Wells Fargo Bank. In recognition of its efforts, the *Network for a Healthy California* presented Debra Mason, a member of the leadership team, with the 2008 Champions for Change Community Engagement Award.

CARES has also partnered with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano in a video highlighting the Farm to School and Farm 2 Kids Programs. A strong supporter, Kaiser Hospital currently features the Bay Point Garden Project on display at its facilities. The Contra Costa Child Care Council brings pre-school children to the community garden once a week, and child care centers whose staff have seen the CARES garden are now following the CARES lead and planting their own gardens.

Promoting Positive Policy Changes

Debra Mason, a member of the CARES leadership team and the driving force behind the program's nutrition and physical activity efforts, is a member of the California State Board of Education's Child Nutrition Advisory Council and is a leading advocate for policy changes at all levels. She is a nationally recognized presenter who delivers ten *Changing Lives, Saving Lives* workshops a year to enthusiastic audiences. And, she recently received the community Volunteer of the Year Award from the local food bank.

Debra has worked closely with the Local Municipal Advisory Council to champion local policies, with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition to promote passage of the federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization and with Senator Barbara Boxer to promote health-enhancing policies at the federal level. CARES and its community garden are often cited as prime examples of the importance of the Farm to School Program and the importance of improving children's nutrition when U.S. Representative George Miller speaks on Capitol Hill. In recognition of Debra's work and the impact the program is having, CARES won the 2010 League of California Afterschool Providers award for Exemplary Practices in Inter-governmental Collaboration.

FITNESS 4 LIFE

Rural Central California Coast

According to Santa Cruz County's *Go for Health* Initiative, the county ranks as one of the worst in California's for overweight children under the age of five, with the estimated cost of the obesity epidemic in the county at more than \$300 million and rising. One in eight local citizens are pre-diabetic or diabetic, and the age at which the onset of type 2 diabetes is occurring is getting lower each year.

As an integral part of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District's afterschool programs, Fitness 4 Life is making great strides in addressing these issues. It is making a difference in the lives of thousands of elementary, middle and high school students and their families by increasing their access to healthy foods, helping them improve their eating habits and providing a wide range of opportunities for them to be physically activity.

Promoting Positive Individual Behaviors

Fitness for Life is committed to its vision of *youth developing skills for a healthy future*. The stakes are high, and the challenges are daunting. Although Watsonville is located within a few miles of the coast, most children have never seen the Pacific Ocean. Even fewer have ever learned to swim. Tragically, as many as 15 children drown each year. Even though the setting is rural, there are few places where children can safely play, get the exercise they need, develop their physical skills or acquire healthy interests that can last a lifetime.

Similarly, while the community is located in the heart of one of California's and the nation's most important agricultural centers, the staples of most family meals are rice and beans, with few and only intermittent fruits, vegetables or fish. And, corner markets and fast food restaurants are easier to access than fruit stands, which are typically located on the outskirts of the town.

Fortunately, the more than 2,500 students who attend the program each year have a significant advantage. Unlike their peers who tend to spend much of their out of school time watching television, playing video games, taking care of their younger brothers and sisters or hanging out on street corners, they're actively engaged in biking, swimming, salsa and hip hop dance, soccer, hula hooping, table tennis, exercise and fitness classes, and SPARK games.

Through a partnership with a local high school, every student in Fitness 4 Life learns how to swim. With instruction from a former world-class cyclist, students become skilled bike riders, are knowledgeable about safety and have opportunities to ride on bike trails in the rolling hills of the countryside. And, many middle school students engage in sports, building their stamina and endurance, and helping them prepare for the program's annual triathlons.

Each year, hundreds of students train for and participate in major year-end triathlon events.

Fitness 4 Life addresses children’s eating preferences and habits through a combination of hands-on nutrition education, organic gardening and cooking classes. Students learn about portion control, the nutritional values of foods and the importance of drinking beverages with zero sugar, increasing their water consumption and reading product labels. Second Harvest Food Bank, local farms and produce from the program’s community and school-based gardens provide fruits and vegetables for cooking classes, special events, and supplements to District-provided afternoon snacks. Holiday treats focus on multicultural menus, all of which feature nutritious options. And, at Halloween, pirate races and booty piñatas filled with healthy foods have replaced candy.

Fitness 4 Life is clear about the connections between children’s health and their performance in school. Its motto is *an apple a day keeps the absences away*, and it’s working!

The program’s motto—an apple a day keeps the absences away—captures the emphasis the District places on academics and the clear connection it sees between children’s health and their ability to perform well in school. Students in the program are attending school much more regularly, and it’s making a difference in their grades and standardized test scores.

In the last year, close to half have moved from Far Below Basic to Basic, and a third increased their test score levels from Below Basic to Basic in English Language Arts, while 75 percent scored at the Proficient or Advanced levels in mathematics. According to classroom teachers, children and young people in the program are more attentive and able to concentrate for longer periods of time. And they’re better behaved. In stark contrast to the statistics for the general student population, last year every Watsonville High School student who regularly attended the program enrolled in college!

Promoting Positive Interpersonal Relationships

A great deal of the success of the program can be attributed to the passion and dedication of the director, the leadership team and the site staff. Staff retention is exceptionally high, demonstrating a strong commitment to the work, the program and the future of the students. Most site staff go on to college to pursue much needed careers in medical, health and education, and each year 25 high school students are hired as junior staff members and wellness leaders.

The program extends its support beyond the afterschool hours to help ensure positive relationships with families, and to provide them with a variety of important resources including family health fairs and access to information about local services and benefits they may qualify for. As part of the Starlight Pilot Program, students and their families have access to free health, vision and dental screenings and follow-up consultations.

Promoting Positive Organizational Environments

The afterschool program staff and school personnel exemplify what it means to have an authentic partnership. Systems have been developed that enable site staff to have immediate and ongoing information about each individual student, from attendance during the school day to their grades and test scores, to areas in which they're doing well and areas in need of improvement. Communication between staff members and teachers provides mutually meaningful information. And students benefit in huge ways from an environment that supports their success.

Site directors are seen as administrators and are actively involved in supporting student academic progress, providing children and young people with enriching opportunities that would not otherwise be available to them. They help to develop and implement school wellness policies. They're often in charge of back-to-school nights and work closely with Healthy Start offices.

Site staff oversee school gardens, and the District's nutrition services director works closely with the program to ensure food is handled safely (the program makes use of mobile kitchens, which it has purchased, to prepare snacks for students). The leadership team at Cesar Chavez Middle school also works with the adjacent high school to train parent activists and facilitate Diabetes Center group meetings.

Fitness 4 Life partnered with the District's nutrition services to apply for (and win) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grants for six elementary school sites with afterschool programs.

Both elementary and middle schools invest in the program financially and work closely with the leadership team and staff in a variety of other ways as well. Fitness 4 Life partnered with the District's nutrition services to apply for a USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant. They were funded for six of the elementary schools where the afterschool program is located. Under the original Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant at Cesar Chavez Middle School, 18,000 pounds (nine tons!) of fresh produce were served annually.

In recognition of its Fitness 4 Life program, Pajaro Valley Unified School District was selected as the 2009 Central Coast Region School District of the year by the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Spotlight Awards.

Promoting Positive Community Environments

Fitness 4 Life is part of the *Go for Health!* Initiative that has developed a comprehensive plan to increase healthy nutrition and regular physical activity among children and youth in Santa Cruz County in order to address the county's childhood obesity epidemic. The overarching goal of the collaborative is for all children to be physically fit. Their approach focuses on supporting children in having at least one hour of physical activity each day and implementing environmental prevention strategies that change or improve community standards, systems, structures and attitudes that influence individual behaviors. Jennifer Bruno, the Director of Fitness 4 Life, co-chairs the schools

committee of the *Go for Health!* Initiative and received one of the second annual School Wellness Policy Awards for their healthy nutrition program, school gardens and creative physical education program.

Fitness 4 Life not only supports the *Go for Health!* overarching goal and its approaches, it ensures that positive changes will happen for all of its participating students. It does this by connecting with local farms to increase access to a variety of fresh local produce, increasing the number of school and community gardens, facilitating access to farmers markets, working with local health care providers to offer health screenings to students and decreasing the barriers and improving the opportunities for students to embrace physical activity as a daily and life-long pattern of behavior.

Through its collaboration with community partners, Fitness 4 Life goes a long way toward helping increase the number of low-income families who access vital resources.

Through this collaboration—and in partnership with the Chief of Santa Cruz Public Health, Salud Para La Gente, United Way, and the Robert Wood Johnson and S.H. Cowell Foundations—Fitness 4 Life not only supports the county-wide 52-10 plan (that includes five servings of fruits and vegetables daily), it helps increase the number of qualified families who take advantage of SNAP (CalFresh in California, formerly Food Stamps), and, because of this, can better afford to purchase fresh produce.

Promoting Positive Policy Changes

As part of its ongoing efforts to promote positive changes in public policy, the Director of the Fitness 4 Life Program, Jennifer Bruno, has played an important role in bringing individuals and organizations together to advocate for and implement policies changes. In addition to presenting workshops at conferences, she arranges for publicly elected officials at the local and state level to visit sites and keeps them informed about changes that are occurring and the difference they are making. Fitness 4 Life actively engages the media and the public to move funders and public policymakers toward creating a healthier environment—and it’s making a difference in the lives of children, families and the community!

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These case studies were developed by the Center for Collaborative Solutions under the Healthy Behaviors Initiative (HBI). This Initiative is funded by the generous support of the California Department of Public Health’s *Network for a Healthy California* through USDA SNAP (known in California as CalFresh—formerly Food Stamps), The California Endowment; and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. For additional information about HBI, go to www.afterschoolsolutions.org. There you will find our guide, *Changing Lives, Saving Lives: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Exemplary Practices in Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Food Security in Afterschool Programs*, and the first set of three case studies.