

Submission in Relation to the Review of Childhood Overweight and Obesity

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KEY ISSUES

An Australian government report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfareⁱ found obesity is more likely in:

- Lower socioeconomic levels
- Indigenous children in urban areas included an excess of both overweight and underweight children, while the remote group included a large excess of underweight children
- In all groups in the study, girls were more likely to be overweight compared to boys.

On the other hand, a separate study published this year had a different finding. That study reported the positive effects water has when it is the main beverage for children. They found that the boys in their study had more than 10-fold higher odds of being obese or overweight than the girls in their study.

Although there are differences between the findings of various studies, two things are certain; overweight and obesity is higher than ever; and our lifestyle has changed and no longer supports us to be physically active.

What can motivate parents: the negative psychological effects of their child's obesity. Their child being the victim of bullying.

Who is overlooked? Some research suggests that parents worry more for their younger children and less about older children. It is a challenge to engage parents whose children are all ages.

Nutrition Challenges - barriers to healthy eating

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study identified the following nutritional challenges for children and parents.

Children's barriers:

- Resistance to healthy foods. Refuse to try anything new, or reject foods.
- Advertising - children see far more ads for unhealthy foods than ads for fruits and vegetables. Healthy foods are less appealing to children because they are not as aggressively marketed as snack foods and convenience foods (such as pre-prepared ready meals).
- Parents and wider family are sometimes not ideal role models.
- Unhealthy foods (characterised by being highly refined and calorie dense) are tasty but they take far more to feel full compared to healthier foods that include fruit and vegetables. So instead of a small amount as a snack, a child eats more of the unhealthy foods until they feel full. In this way, they can eat a full day's calorie allowance just in the playground. And if they go home to fast food as a family meal, their calorie intake far exceeds their daily allowance and needs.
- Fresh fruit and vegetables may be hard to get and expensive in regional and remote areas.
- Peer group pressure to reject healthy eating options and eat unhealthy snack foods instead.

Parental barriers:

- Change to family structure and dynamics: Many families have the challenge of both parents working, and working long hours. Other families may be a sole parent again working long hours who runs the household and can be looking for fast options to increase family time.
- Competing needs work and family: Parents can be time poor because balancing work and family is difficult. While employers report that they are family friendly, this is not the case in practice. So the needs of work commitments cannot always fit around running a family.

- Long work hours and long commutes mean parents have limited time to play and be active with children. This also restricts their ability to walk children to school or home again.
- Parents can choose for convenience: Processed foods are quicker to prepare for a family meal. Processed and take away foods can be attractive to many parents who are time-poor.
- Some Parents may have their own poor diet or exercise habits which could negatively influence their children.
- Parents can find it difficult to change their own food choices to healthy and homemade, and/or motivation to do more physical activity. This is often as a result of diet and long hours in employment activities, be it at work or commuting.

Barriers to Physical activity

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study identified the following as barriers to physical activity:

- Whole population is more sedentary
- Children no longer walk/pedal as transport
- Fear around stranger danger, predators etc
- Less likely play outdoors after school/weekends
- Children get less incidental exercise (partly due to so many labour saving devices)
- Change in children entertainment; screen time is often used as babysitter
- Socialise with friends outside of school on screens/internet
- Costs associated with sports
- Not enough facilities or facilities that are considered unsafe (infrastructure; playgrounds, skate parts)
- Parents don't model good behaviours and exercise
- Parents do not have time for active play with children or planned activity.

EVIDENCE

Evidence indicates many parents are unable to identify own child's weight problem. Alarming, 1/3 to 1/2 of parents cannot see their child has a weight problem.

A study released this year indicates water as a primary beverage is associated with gaining and maintaining a ideal weight (as measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI) that is almost universal in its use globally).

Family and community involvement is critical to any strategyⁱⁱ.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

What doesn't work:

Programs trying to tackle nutrition, physical activity, and weight loss all in the one program did not have positive impacts on all three of these outcomesⁱⁱⁱ. Instead, focus on one changeable behaviour gets positive results. Such as replacing sugar-sweetened beverages and juice with water.

- Walk to School Day^{iv}: Walk to school doesn't work as an initiative to get children moving more. A barrier is that parents report that they see Walk to School Day as a way to teach road safety. Children who participate in Walk to School Day have the same characteristics as the children who usually walk to school. So, the campaign does not convert inactive children into having more active habits. Another barrier is that parents' schedules mean they are already at work (or commuting) and cannot accompany their child on Walk to School Day. In these circumstances, their child will not begin to walk to school as it is seen as unsafe without a parent with the child.

- Banning soft drinks^v: This does not work. Children will just buy energy drinks or fruit juice which is not ideal because they are just as high in sugar. Instead of focussing on the evils of sugar-sweetened beverages there is evidence that focussing on the positives of water is an effective and accessible way to help children maintain, or attain, a healthy weight and BMI.

The way forward

Features of successful programs:

- Must be around lifestyle choice rather than a short-term program that is abandoned
- Programs with narrower goals were more successful by focussing on one aspect intensively
- Programs that have a counselling component are successful at helping children make better nutritional choices and increasing physical activity
- Programs aimed at school-age children 5 and over
- Supporting changes in the child's at-school time.

Suggested Strategies

All of the below strategies are aimed at helping children make healthier choices at school. The issue of better nutrition on the dinner table is outside of the scope of P&C Federation. However, consideration of a program to empower better nutrition options is a must.

So, whilst P&C Federation acknowledges education on nutrition in all communities is critical, we next focus on ways children's educators and P&C Associations can make a positive difference in children's health and weight. Here are some strategies that schools can offer directly to students during school time.

1. Campaign for water as the only beverage.

The latest research reflects a major shift in thinking towards pushing positives (drink only water) rather than limiting negatives (banning sugar sweetened beverages). A study published in 2016 shows that having water as the only beverage is associated with maintaining a healthy weight. Water is cheap, accessible and schools can easily encourage children to drink water only. It is very easily implemented because, unlike some nutritional strategies, drinking water does not call on parents to be change agents.

2. Northside Enterprise's Bushlink

Since January 2009, Northside Enterprise Inc., through its [Bushlink program](#), has employed adults with intellectual disability to carry out environmental projects with a focus on bush regeneration, gardening and grounds maintenance work alongside school students at their school.

Bushlink teams apply their specialist environmental skills to specific projects on the school grounds eg. bush regeneration, kitchen gardens, overgrown areas. By creating a kitchen garden they produce fruit and vegetables that give children healthy lunch options. Using produce from the school's kitchen garden in canteen food is a way to support children in making better nutrition choices.

Schools that have created a kitchen garden report the children are very excited about their fruit and vegetable crops. They are proud to be growing food for the canteen and enjoy the foods that use 'their' fruit and vegetables. P&C groups could sponsor a plant or tree in the school grounds. This can foster a connection between students and community and the garden.

Another benefit of the Bushlink program is that it creates a space for children to be involved with other groups within the community.

3. The Healthy and Active Australia resource kit

The Healthy Kids^{vi} initiative has a [resource kit](#) for schools. That resource has case studies that show how healthy choices were put into action and brought positive changes to the school community. The healthy active message is that quality healthy eating and physical activity at school is a way to support health in all students.

4. Healthy Kids Campaign

The [Healthy Kids website](#)^{vii} content is structured around five key messages:

- Get active for an hour or more each day.
- Choose water as a drink.
- Eat more fruit and vegetables.
- Turn off the TV or computer and get active.
- Eat fewer snacks and select healthier alternatives.

Remembering that campaigns that try to address too many things at once do not have long-term success, P&C Federation recommends choosing one of the above points and focussing on it for a school term.

5. Rethinking fundraising

Schools and P&C Associations can reconsider the fundraising . Currently, many food-based fundraising involves unhealthy foods (chocolates, doughnuts etc). Many P&C Associations are now more focussed on healthy options or fundraising that is removed from food-centred approaches. These include a walk-a-thon, Olympic-type events, and other outdoor activities. Selling plants is an alternative to selling chocolates.

6. Cheaper sports costs for children in school?

Focus should be placed on children being active. To really encourage this, we suggest consideration of a Tax Deduction or other incentives for parents whose children are involved in sports or other activities that have fees. This is a departure from the ‘tax and punish’ way we often see in operation. Instead, a ‘reward and save’ method would promote the message that we save money on services for overweight and obesity that currently drain the wallet. The deduction would not apply to gym memberships because they may be covered through Private Health Insurance funds. If governments make a tax deduction an incentive it would be a reward to individuals to encourage children to take up a sporting activity and build a more active approach to health lifestyles. A tax deduction for parents own sports costs could encourage adults to be good role models. Because they are being active themselves by competing in organised sports.

7. Ways for schools to encourage physical activity

P&C Federation is in support of schools encouraging physical activity that is not dependent on being parent-led. There are two types:

Curriculum:

- Some schools have physical activity as homework, eg run, skip, ride a bike, play a game or sport training
- Parent-helpers for sport lessons, events and carnivals encourages participation by our children
- Encourage parent and teacher participation in sports curriculum set a good example.

In-school time:

- Schools are setting up fitness stations on the school’s oval or playground
- Sport and activities accessible to all students performing at all levels, not just competition level

- Run regular healthy living competitions/challenges for all students and all classes.

SUMMARY

In summary, the way to a healthier and happier future for our children is a collaborative approach. Governments, Parents, educators and community groups each bring something positive to the problem of overweight and obesity in our community.

P&C Associations have an opportunity to bring all sectors together (Government, educators and corporates) for the health of our young people.

ⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2005) "A Picture of Australia's Children"

ⁱⁱ Hearn, L. et al., (2008), "Review of Evidence to Guide Primary Health Care Policy and Practice to Prevent Childhood Obesity"

ⁱⁱⁱ Hadley et al., (2010), "What Works for the Prevention And Treatment Of Obesity Among Children: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions"

^{iv} Merom, D. et al., (2005) "Process Evaluation of the New South Wales Walk Safely to School Day"

^v Meir, K., et al, (2016) "Water as the Primary Beverage: a Predictor of Pediatric Obesity"

^{vi} A healthy and Active Australia, Australian Government, Department of Health, <http://www.healthyactive.gov.au/> (as at the time of the submission, August 2016)

^{vii} Healthy Kids NSW, <http://www.healthykids.nsw.gov.au> (as at the time of the submission, August 2016)