

REPORT BRIEF • SEPTEMBER 2006

PROGRESS IN PREVENTING CHILDHOOD OBESITY: HOW DO WE MEASURE UP?

Over the past few decades, a steady and dramatic increase in obesity has occurred throughout the entire U.S. population, particularly among children and youth. Currently, one third of American children and youth are either obese or at risk of becoming obese. Over the past 30 years, the obesity rate has nearly tripled for children ages 2–5 years (from 5 to 14 percent) and youth ages 12–19 years (from 5 to 17 percent), and quadrupled for children ages 6–11 years (from 4 to 19 percent).

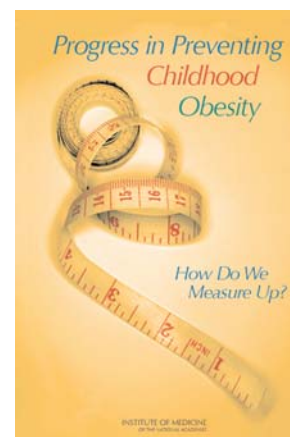
The country is beginning to recognize childhood obesity as a major public health epidemic that will incur substantial costs to the nation. However, the current level of investment by the public and private sectors still does not match the extent of the problem. There is a substantial underinvestment of resources to adequately address the scope of the obesity crisis when compared to the expressed concern for and commitment to possible infectious disease outbreaks or bioterrorism events.

EFFECTIVELY RESPONDING TO THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC

Questions remain about how to effectively address the growing obesity epidemic. First, what can we do about it? Second, how do we track and evaluate the nation's response so that effective policies, programs, and initiatives can be replicated, adapted or refined, scaled-up, and disseminated?

The 2005 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance* addressed the first question by offering a blueprint to guide concerted actions for many stakeholders including government, industry, media, communities, schools, and families. Many childhood obesity prevention policies and programs are currently underway to increase physical activity and promote healthful eating among children and youth. These interventions, however, generally remain fragmented and small-scale. Moreover, the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation have hindered the development of an evidence base to identify, apply, and disseminate lessons learned and support promising childhood obesity prevention efforts.

To extend the reach and impact of the *Health in the Balance* report, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation requested that IOM convene an expert committee to examine the nation's progress in preventing childhood obesity. This report, *Progress in Preventing Childhood Obesity: How Do We Measure Up?*, presents a call to action for key stakeholders to lead and commit to childhood obesity prevention, evaluate policies and programs, monitor progress, and disseminate promising practices.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

LEAD AND COMMIT TO CHILDHOOD OBESITY PREVENTION

Government, industry, communities, schools, and families should demonstrate leadership and commitment by mobilizing the resources required to identify, implement, evaluate, and disseminate effective policies and interventions that support childhood obesity prevention goals.

EVALUATE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Policy makers, program planners, program implementers, and other interested stakeholders—within and across relevant sectors—should evaluate all childhood obesity prevention efforts, strengthen the evaluation capacity, and develop quality interventions that take into account diverse perspectives, that use culturally relevant approaches, and that meet the needs of diverse populations and contexts.

MONITOR PROGRESS

Government, industry, communities, schools, and families should expand or develop relevant surveillance and monitoring systems and, as applicable, should engage in research to examine the impact of childhood obesity prevention policies, interventions, and actions on relevant outcomes, paying particular attention to the unique needs of diverse groups and high-risk populations.

DISSEMINATE PROMISING PRACTICES

Government, industry, communities, schools, and families should foster information-sharing activities and disseminate evaluation and research findings through diverse communication channels and media to actively promote the use and scaling up of effective childhood obesity prevention policies and interventions.

IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATING POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The committee strongly encourages stakeholders responsible for childhood obesity prevention policies and interventions to view evaluation as an essential component of the program planning and implementation process rather than as an optional activity. If something is considered valuable enough to invest the time, energy, and resources of a group or organization, then it is also worthy of the investment necessary to carefully document the success of the effort. The committee emphasizes the need for a collective commitment to evaluation by those responsible for funding, planning, implementing, and monitoring childhood obesity prevention efforts. Further, there will be a greater likelihood of success when public, private, and voluntary organizations merge their strengths to ensure a coordinated and sustained long-term effort. The resulting evaluations will contribute to building a strong and multifaceted evidence base upon which promising practices can be identified, scaled up, and institutionalized across different sectors and settings.

NEXT STEPS FOR CONFRONTING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY EPIDEMIC

GOVERNMENT

- Federal, state, and local governments should each establish a high-level task force on childhood obesity prevention to identify priorities for action, coordinate public-sector efforts, and establish effective interdepartmental collaborations.
- The federal government should provide a sustained commitment and long-term investment in childhood obesity prevention initiatives found to be effective and to national surveillance efforts to track trends in the obesity epidemic.
- State and local governments should demonstrate leadership for childhood obesity prevention by committing adequate resources and developing policies that lead to changes supporting a healthy school environment and healthy communities.

INDUSTRY AND MEDIA

- Independent and periodic evaluations of industry's efforts to promote healthy lifestyles should be conducted.
- Industry should engage in a collaborative process to develop and strengthen public-private partnerships that support childhood obesity prevention efforts, and include creating a mechanism for sharing proprietary data that can expand understanding of how marketing influences children's and youths' attitudes and behaviors, and developing a sustainable funding strategy to inform interventions.
- Media should evaluate progress in developing and communicating storylines and programming that promote healthy lifestyles.
- Media should evaluate existing efforts regarding childhood obesity prevention

with the goal of developing, coordinating, and evaluating a more comprehensive long-term, national multimedia and public relations campaign focused on obesity prevention in children and youth.

COMMUNITIES

- Communities should develop a community health index toolkit through government-academic-community partnerships to assist in examining factors relevant to creating healthy communities.
- Communities should compile and widely share community-based evaluation results, lessons learned, and community action plans.

SCHOOLS

- Schools should bolster physical-education and physical-activity requirements, standards, and efforts in preschool, child-care, and after-school programs.
- Schools should be provided with adequate and sustained resources through federal and state government funding to implement relevant changes in the school environment to increase physical activity and the availability and consumption of foods and beverages that support a healthful diet.

HOME

- Families should assess the home environment to ensure that foods and beverages supporting a healthful diet are consumed by children and youth at home and served in reasonable portion sizes.
- Families should emphasize physical activity as a family priority and establish rules or guidelines that limit leisure screen time (e.g., television, DVDs or videos, movies, video games, and computers).

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

Copies of *Progress in Preventing Childhood Obesity: How Do We Measure Up?* are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, N.W., Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055; (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area); Internet, <http://www.nap.edu>. The full text of this report is available at <http://www.nap.edu>.

This study was supported by funds from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization that provided support for the project.

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