

Why Child Care Matters for Obesity Prevention



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Child care needs to be part of any strategic plan for obesity prevention.

Healthy child development depends on eating nutritious food and being physically active every day. This is especially important during the preschool years when children are rapidly building their brains and bodies.

Millions of America's children spend hours in out-of-home child care each day. The care environment greatly influences what children eat and do, and can play a key role in preventing childhood obesity. Policies for nutrition, physical activity, screen media, and training for child care providers are important tools for getting children on track for good health.

- Over 80% of children under age 5 spend some time in non-parental care.¹
- 18.4% of 4-year-old US children are obese.²
- Overweight preschool children are 5 times more likely to be overweight at age 12 than those who were never overweight.³

1. Child care impacts children at a critical stage of development.

Obesity prevention must start early in life. Many young children have little opportunity for sustained physical activity during child care and are fed high calorie, low nutrient foods. Child care practices and policies can have widespread and long-term impact.



2. Child care practice is associated with childhood obesity.

A large national study found that the type of child care in the year before kindergarten is linked to obesity. Children cared for by a parent or in licensed child care centers are less likely to start kindergarten obese than children in child care offered by extended family, friends, and neighbors.⁴ In the US, 33 to 53% of children under 5 yrs old with employed parents are cared for in these unlicensed settings.⁵ This underscores the need for education and policies that support good practices in all types of child care.

3. Child care offers opportunities for health promotion.

Obesity prevention efforts must happen both in and out of the home. Guidelines that encourage healthy behaviors for children in child care can also benefit their families. Providing information to parents can increase their understanding of children's nutritional needs and help improve home meals and sack lunches sent to child care.

4. Child care is an investment in tomorrow's students.

Well fed, healthy children are better prepared to focus and learn in the classroom. Quality child care across all settings would help reduce differences in early learning experiences that can lead to gaps in school readiness.

References

- ¹ US Census Bureau. 2005. <http://www.census.gov>
- ² Anderson SE, Whitaker RC. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. 2009 Apr;163(4):344-8.
- ³ Nader PR et al. *Pediatrics*. 2006 Sep;118(3):594-601.
- ⁴ Maher EJ et al. *Pediatrics*. 2008 Aug;122(2):322-30.
- ⁵ National Center for Children in Poverty. 2008. http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_835.html

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