The Significance of Childhood Obesity

Obesity currently affects 17% of American children and adolescents, a number that has tripled since 1980. More than a third of children are considered overweight, and these children are at a higher risk of becoming overweight or obese adults than children who weigh an appropriate amount (CDC 2012). If these children do not change their lifestyles and manage their weight, they are at risk for the adverse effects of obesity, such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and type 2 diabetes. Healthy children grow up to be healthy, productive adults and it is therefore extremely important to ensure that our children have the knowledge they need to make healthy, informed decisions regarding diet and exercise.

Our educational project focuses on children between the ages of 10 and 14 because this is a period where children start gaining more food independence and forming habits that will stay with them throughout their lives. We will also reach out to the families and teachers of these children, as involving the adults who care for the children is important for long-term success. Keeping the adults informed about the educational project ensures that the children have reliable sources to go to when they have questions about diet or exercise.

The Project

We will attempt to improve children’s dietary and exercise habits with an interdisciplinary approach. Our main focus is on the children, and our 6-week program offers educational material regarding obesity and its risks, pedometers with individualized and group goals, a healthy homework program and a survey for the children to identify what will help them reach their goals. We will also offer educational support to the teachers and send home a weekly newsletter to parents to keep them updated on the program and to provide information that will help them keep their child on the right
Rationale for Program

By giving the children information on obesity and the related risks, we hope to give the children an idea of just how important maintaining a healthy lifestyle is. If they can see how damaging obesity is, maybe they will be motivated to avoid becoming overweight.

Providing pedometers and setting goals will give the children a visualization of their progress. We will set up a poster in the classroom where the students will post their daily steps. The class will set a goal of x-number of steps taken by all children to give the project a team-like feel. The students will want to reach the team goal in order to win a prize, and to reach the team goal they will have to meet their individual goals. Hopefully, the students will motivate each other, and this motivation will keep the students going if they feel like they are not making adequate progress.

The idea of compulsory fitness homework comes from a study reported in 2011 by International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity. 97 children between the ages of 9 and 11 participated in the project and kept track of daily steps taken, time spent in front of a screen, active and passive transport and dietary habits in a 4-day dairy (students were not required to journal Friday-Sunday). At the end of the study, they found significant increases in healthy food consumption and daily steps taken, as well as a decrease in unhealthy foods eaten (Duncan, et al. 2011).

Another way to determine food attitudes and behaviors is to give the children a short survey before and after the project. We will ask them what foods they think taste good, what foods they think are healthy, if they see any barriers to healthy living (vending machines at school, unhealthy food kept at home, etc.) and how they can improve their dietary and exercise habits. Hopefully, after the program the children will report an increased knowledge of healthy behaviors and improved dietary and exercise
habits.

We recognize that involving teachers can help the students understand the importance of the project and motivate them to continue their healthy habits. The CDC has developed a program to educate teachers, The School Health Guidelines to Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/npao/pdf/facilitatorguide.pdf - CDC 2012). This program informs caregivers on the facts and consequences of obesity and ways to educate students on healthy behaviors.

We will also send home a weekly newsletter to parents to inform them of the class’s progress and offer helpful hints to motivate and aid their children in making appropriate decisions. The first newsletter will educate the parents on the seriousness of the obesity epidemic, its potential long term health effects on their own children, and the goals of the program. Each consecutive newsletter will discuss the progress of the program emphasizing how the parent can help change the child’s current home habits. This will include parenting tips focusing on creative ideas of how they can assist their children to eat better and incorporate exercise in their daily lives. A few particular ideas we hope to convey to the parents during the six week program include: decreasing electronic usage (TV, video games, and Internet), healthy food choices (lunch, dinner, and after school snacks), activity ideas (family activities and after school sports), as well as general healthy living habits (adequate sleep and encouraging participation in the program). Incorporating parent involvement into the program is key not only for participation in the program but more importantly, sustainable healthy lifestyle choices.

The key to success of our education program will focus on each interdisciplinary member to rely the material appropriately and clearly for the fullest impact on the student. During this six week program each member will have a clear concise role and plan. For example, the teacher will be in charge
of the main lesson plan, motivating students, and reviewing the fitness homework of the students.

Some of the lessons we would like to incorporate would include use of mypyramid, reading labels, and the concept of calories in/calories out. These lessons taught in the classroom will then be reiterated in sub classes such as health class, P.E., and even music. Because each child learns differently the lesson plan will incorporate visual, auditory, and kinetic learning with the hope to maximize the understanding of the program for each child.

References


**Appendix**

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Sample Chart for Recording Individual Goals

This chart can be re-printed for each week of the educational project. The daily steps will be totaled at the end of each school day to get a class total (the daily step goal will be depend on the number of children enrolled in the class as well as the average current fitness level of the students). The total daily steps taken by all students will be recorded on a poster to help the children visualize their goal. If the students reach their goal at the end of the project, they will be rewarded with a movie, fitness fun day or other school-approved function.
Your heart is a muscle that pumps blood to your body. Exercising keeps your heart strong.

**KEEP THE BEAT,**
**EXERCISE WITH YOUR FEET**
REMEMBER KIDS...

CALORIES IN=CALORIES OUT!!!

Posters similar to these will be placed around the school. Each will be bright and colorful with easy to remember slogans that will catch their attention and help them remember the message.
This diary will be used in the home every day to keep the child accountable with his/her activities and diet. By having the children documenting how they felt at the end of the day it will also serve to help them connect healthy eating/activity with feeling better. The diary will be discussed within class to help connect education material to daily living.