



APA Public Interest Government Relations Office

Recommendations to Prevent Youth Obesity and Disordered Eating

In the last quarter century, the prevalence of obesity in children and adolescents has increased more than threefold (Ogden et al., 2006). Recent evidence suggests that prevalence rates remain high, affecting between 11% and 27% of children and adolescents depending on age and ethnicity (Ogden, Carroll, & Flegal, 2008). In addition, it is currently estimated that 30% of girls and 16% of boys in U.S. high schools suffer from disordered eating (Austin, Ziyadeh, Leliher, Zachary, & Forman, 2001). Because obesity and disordered eating and their associated morbidities often co-occur over time and share both risk and protective factors, joint prevention efforts are recommended to address the physical and mental health complications associated with these problems (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006; Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Haines, Story, & Eisenberg, 2007).

Recommendations to Prevent Youth Obesity and Disordered Eating

APA supports legislative initiatives aimed at improving nutrition and physical activity; increasing body satisfaction; decreasing weight stigmatization and weight-related teasing; promoting responsible marketing to children; supporting healthy home environments; and addressing cultural and socioeconomic factors related to obesity and disordered eating. Specific recommendations for federal policies to prevent youth obesity and disordered eating include the following:

- Education, advocacy, and research efforts to integrate the prevention of obesity, disordered eating and eating disorders. Sound nutrition, an active lifestyle, healthy body image, reduction of teasing and stigmatization based on weight and shape, media literacy, and the development of “life skills” (e.g., effective stress management) are necessary components in the prevention of obesity, disordered eating and eating disorders (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006).
- Prevention and intervention efforts that accurately reflect the central role of culture and ensure that the specific needs of different ethnic and socioeconomic groups are addressed (Black & Young-Hyman, 2007; Clay, Mordhorst, & Lehn, 2002; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002).
- Projects and programs that educate families on the importance of family meals at home, encourage families to regularly eat meals together at home, and support innovative strategies to help families across all socioeconomic levels successfully implement family mealtimes. Recent research suggests that how the family conducts its mealtimes, the regularity of family mealtimes, and the value that the family places on regular family mealtimes may be associated with improved nutrition habits and healthy weight in children and youth (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Jacobs & Fiese, 2007; Kremers, Brug, deVries, & Engles, 2003).
- Initiatives to inform parents that encouraging dieting in youth may lead to long-term increased weight and disordered eating and that a helpful alternative is to direct efforts toward modeling and providing a home environment that supports healthful eating, physical activity, and well-being (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Story, & van den Berg, 2008).
- Research on behavioral interventions that effectively help youth and families maintain healthy nutrition, appropriate levels of physical activity, and body satisfaction.
- Initiatives to improve the availability of and access to affordable, healthy foods across socioeconomic levels.



Recommendations to Prevent Youth Obesity and Disordered Eating (continued)

- Initiatives to make neighborhoods safe so that families and children have increased opportunities for outdoor activities.
- Efforts to increase the availability of healthy food options, including fresh fruits and vegetables and sources of calcium, in day care settings, preschools and schools.
- Strategies to increase opportunities for physical activity in schools through ensuring that schools are required to offer the recommended daily levels of physical activity to students.
- Efforts to increase body satisfaction among youth across the weight spectrum.
- Bullying prevention and intervention programs that specifically address weight-related teasing.
- Efforts to reduce targeted advertising and marketing that promotes unhealthy foods and beverages to children.
- Efforts to end marketing and advertising that objectifies and sexualizes girls and women.
- Initiatives to educate parents on age-related differences in how children understand and are affected by television advertising and other forms of marketing (Kunkel et al., 2004).
- Screening for physical, behavioral, and mental health concerns related to poor nutrition and physical inactivity for individuals across the weight spectrum.
- Screening for disordered eating and unhealthy weight control behaviors for individuals across the weight spectrum to increase early identification and intervention.
- Public awareness efforts related to the benefits of healthy eating, appropriate levels of physical activity, and body satisfaction for individuals across the weight spectrum.

APA Strongly Urges Congress to Support:

- **Bullying and Gang Reduction for Improved Education Act (H.R. 3438)** provides for bullying and gang (as well as drug and violence) prevention and accountability-based programs designed to enhance school safety. This legislation includes information specific to weight-based teasing.
- **Children and Media Research Advancement Act (CAMRA) (S. 948)** establishes a program on children and the media within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to study the role and impact of electronic media in the development of children.
- **Healthy Lifestyles and Prevention (HeLP) America Act (S. 1342/H.R. 2633)** aims to improve the health of Americans and reduce health care costs by reorienting the nation's health care system toward prevention, wellness, and self care. This legislation addresses childhood obesity through efforts that include improving the nutritional value of foods available at schools and increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables to students.
- **Improved Nutrition and Physical Activity (IMPACT) Act (H.R. 2677)** addresses the problems of both obesity and eating disorders through increased training and prevention with a focus on healthy eating and improved physical activity.



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