



# childhood obesity



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For the most current version of our strategy, please visit our website at [www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity](http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity).

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is committed to tackling one of the most urgent threats to the health of our children and families—childhood obesity. Our goal is to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015.

Our strategy is to change public policies, school and neighborhood settings, and corporate practices in ways that make our communities healthier, with a particular focus on increasing access to healthy, affordable foods and opportunities for physical activity.

We place special emphasis on reaching children who are at greatest risk for obesity or have limited access to healthy foods and safe places to play: African American, Latino, American Indian, and Asian/Pacific Islander children, and children living in lower-income areas. We do this because it's consistent with our founder's vision and our values as a Foundation to focus on those who are most vulnerable and in greatest need.

We work on both sides of the energy-balance equation: calories in (food and beverages consumed) and calories burned (physical activity). Our tactics include funding local organizations to make positive changes at the community level, advocating for healthier policies in the public and private sectors, and providing grants to researchers and evaluators to

strengthen the evidence about what works. Our communications strategy underlies all of this work, increasing awareness about the issue; lifting up promising approaches for reversing the epidemic; and ensuring that researchers, advocates, and communities have the messages, tools, and training they need to achieve their goals.

To be successful, the movement to prevent childhood obesity must harness talent and energy from every part of our society—schools, governments, community and nonprofit organizations, health care providers, media, the food and beverage industry, and, of course, parents. We believe that everyone has a role to play in preventing childhood obesity, and we're confident that, by working together, we will be successful.

## THE PROBLEM

Childhood obesity threatens the health of our young people and their future potential. Today, more than 23.5 million children and adolescents in the United States—nearly one in three young people—are either obese or overweight, putting them at higher risk for serious, even life-threatening health problems. If we don't reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, the current generation of young people could be the first in U.S. history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.

The childhood obesity epidemic is particularly severe in communities of color. More than 39 percent of Latino



and African American children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with about 28 percent of White children. There are also significant disparities in access to healthy foods and safe places to play. One major study of nearly 700 neighborhoods found that communities of color and racially mixed communities have access to fewer supermarkets than predominantly White communities. And communities with high levels of poverty are significantly less likely to have places where people can be physically active, such as parks, green spaces, and bike lanes.

Obesity also poses a tremendous financial threat to our economy and our health care system. The medical cost of adult obesity in the United States is difficult to calculate, but estimates range from \$147 billion to nearly \$210 billion per year. Childhood obesity alone carries a huge price tag—up to \$14 billion per year in direct health care costs. Retired military leaders warn that childhood obesity also threatens our national security because so many young people who want to serve in the armed forces aren't fit to do so.

By reversing the childhood obesity epidemic, we will make our nation healthier and stronger, save lives, ease the financial strain on our health care system,

and increase economic productivity for the next generation of American workers.

#### WHAT WE FUND

RWJF funds efforts to change public policies, community environments, and corporate practices in ways likely to improve nutrition and increase physical activity—both of which are critical to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic. We focus on six priorities the evidence suggests will have the greatest and longest-lasting impact on our children. These priorities can be supported by numerous approaches, some of which are listed below.

**1. Ensure that all foods and beverages served and sold in schools meet or exceed the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.** Junk food has no place in our schools, whether it's served in cafeterias; sold through vending machines, school stores, or fundraisers; or given away as classroom treats or rewards.

- Since 2005, the Foundation has supported the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program, which works with teachers and parents in more than 14,000 elementary, middle, and high schools to improve the quality of the foods and beverages

served on campus and increase opportunities for physical activity throughout the day. Some participating schools now are reporting reduced obesity rates among their students.

- RWJF also is collaborating with The Pew Charitable Trusts on the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods project, which aims to promote strong federal standards for all foods and beverages served and sold in school. Working with Pew and other allies in the field, RWJF helped to generate more than 130,000 comments on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's proposed school meal standards in the summer of 2011, helping to inform the strong final rule. We now are focusing attention on standards for snack foods and beverages sold outside of the school meals program.

**2. Increase access to high-quality, affordable foods through new or improved grocery stores and healthier corner stores and bodegas.**

Research shows that having a supermarket or grocery store in a neighborhood increases residents' fruit and vegetable consumption and is associated with lower body mass index (BMI) among adolescents. Local governments can increase access to nutritious, affordable foods that are appealing to local residents by working in partnership with the business community to bring new grocery stores and healthier corner stores and bodegas to underserved areas.

- RWJF is working closely with The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based advocacy organization dedicated to promoting

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access to affordable, nutritious food. The Food Trust has achieved tremendous success in bringing supermarkets back to underserved communities in Pennsylvania, and together we're seeking to replicate those results in other states. The federal Fresh Food Financing Initiative, which aims to address the limited and inequitable access to nutritious food, was heavily informed by The Food Trust's work.

- At the same time, RWJF's *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* program is helping 49 communities across the country reshape their environments to support healthy living and prevent childhood obesity. As part of this effort, many communities are building new farmers' markets and working to increase access to healthy foods in rural areas.
- Private-sector engagement is also a critical component of our food-access strategy. For example, we supported work by the Hudson Institute that examined how the sale of "better-for-you" foods impacts companies' bottom lines. Hudson's analysis showed that companies with a higher percentage of sales from "better-for-you" products perform better financially, and that for 15 major companies, such products drove more than 70 percent of sales growth during a five-year period.

**3. Increase the availability, time, duration, and intensity of physical activity during the school day and in out-of-school programs.** Schools can increase students' physical activity by requiring active participation in daily physical education classes and by finding

creative ways to incorporate physical activity into the day. After-school programs located in schools, parks, and recreational centers also can develop innovative ways to help children be active.

- Pioneering Healthier Communities, a program of The Y (formerly the YMCA of the USA), is working to change after-school programs run by The Y and others, so more children can be physically active outside of the school day. The program is active in more than 30 communities in at least six states.
- The Y is also one of nine major youth-serving organizations involved in ChildObesity 180's Healthy Kids Out of School initiative. The participating organizations collectively agreed to adopt principles and change policies to help kids drink right, snack smart, and move more.

### **4. Increase physical activity by improving the built environment in communities.**

Communities can increase opportunities for physical activity by building new sidewalks, bike paths, parks, and playgrounds—and by improving those that already exist. To encourage families to use these resources and facilities, communities can implement traffic-safety measures and neighborhood watch programs, so children are safe when walking, biking, or playing outside.

- The Safe Routes to School National Partnership works with local communities to encourage more children and adolescents to walk and bike to school safely. The partnership and its state networks focus on

removing barriers to physical activity in lower-income communities, expanding sidewalks and bike lanes, and creating safer environments that encourage children to stay active.

- We also support *Communities Creating Healthy Environments* (CCHE), which works in communities of color to address the root causes of the childhood obesity epidemic. CCHE is especially focused on recreation equity, ensuring that youths in traditionally underserved and underfunded areas have the same opportunity to be physically active as their peers in wealthier communities.
- And RWJF's *Active Living Research* program continues to build the evidence base about which policies and programs most effectively support physical activity.

### **5. Use pricing strategies—both incentives and disincentives—to promote the purchase of healthier foods.**

Prices can significantly affect family food choices and are emerging as an important strategy in the movement to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic. We support research to assess the effectiveness of pricing strategies, both incentives that promote consumption of healthy foods and beverages and disincentives that discourage consumption of unhealthy products.

- Several RWJF programs are exploring the connection between food and beverage prices and children's health. A study from *Healthy Eating Research* shows that, when healthy foods like fruits and vegetables are more affordable, children are less likely to gain excess



weight. The program also is examining how federal agricultural subsidies affect the production and prices of fruits and vegetables nationwide.

- Together, *Healthy Eating Research* and *Bridging the Gap* are contributing to research on pricing policies and practices that schools and communities are using to improve health and prevent obesity.

#### **6. Reduce youths' exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods through regulation, policy, and effective industry self-regulation.**

Unhealthy foods and beverages are heavily marketed to children, and research shows that exposure to food marketing messages increases children's obesity risk. Some studies suggest that marketing restrictions are among the most powerful and cost-effective interventions available. The Foundation is exploring how food and beverage marketing affects children's food preferences and their risk for obesity.

- With RWJF support, the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University released the most comprehensive assessment of sugary drink nutrition and marketing ever conducted. The 2011 report found that, despite industry pledges to market fewer unhealthy beverages to children, there is more—not less—advertising for sugary drinks overall. For example, youths' exposure to TV ads for full-calorie sodas doubled between 2008 and 2010. Other Rudd reports focus on nutritional content and marketing practices for children's cereals and fast food.
- The National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN), created by Public Health Law and Policy and funded by RWJF, helps leaders in the field

navigate complex legal and policy issues by providing the latest research and developing model policies for communities. Restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children is one of the program's key focus areas.

The Foundation also supports efforts to engage government leaders at all levels. *Leadership for Healthy Communities* explores how to create healthier, more vibrant communities with local, state, and federal officials and provides them with the resources they need to become obesity-prevention champions.

RWJF also is bringing together disparate groups from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors to develop innovative solutions to reverse the epidemic. For example, RWJF is one of six founding organizations of the Partnership for a Healthier America, an independent, nonpartisan organization that aims to advance the goals of First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign to prevent childhood obesity. The partnership is bringing together public, private, and nonprofit leaders to secure sustained, measurable commitments aimed at reversing the epidemic, as well as to track the impact of those commitments. Through the partnership, hospitality industry leaders such as Darden Restaurants and Hyatt Hotels made a commitment to improve kids' meals to feature healthier options.

The Foundation also is implementing online networking strategies to connect leaders and supporters in the national movement to prevent childhood obesity. *PreventObesity.net* supports all those working to change policies and environments to help children and families eat well and move more, especially in communities at highest risk for obesity. RWJF also works with

MomsRising, a national grassroots organization that uses online tools to engage and educate its multicultural base of more than one million members. With RWJF support, MomsRising is calling on parents to raise their voices to demand healthier snack foods and beverages in schools.

The programs described in this document are only a sampling of the Foundation's efforts to prevent childhood obesity. For a full list of programs, visit [www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity](http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity).

#### **WHAT WE DON'T FUND**

Because RWJF's strategy for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic hinges on changing policies and environments, we generally do not support projects that provide only information or education. Because we focus on preventing obesity, we do not invest in research regarding medical or surgical treatment of obesity. In keeping with Foundation policy, we give preference to proposals developed by public agencies and tax-exempt organizations.

RWJF does not accept unsolicited proposals for its work to prevent childhood obesity. We issue specific solicitations for proposals and ideas throughout the year. If you register to receive funding alerts through the Foundation's website at [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org), you will receive email notices of each funding opportunity.