



childhood obesity



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For the most current information on our strategy, please visit our Web site at www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity

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

We place special emphasis on reaching children at greatest risk: African-American, Latino, Native American, Asian-American and Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities. Our grantmaking focuses on children and youth ages 3 to 18, a critical period during which lifelong habits are formed.

We work mainly in schools and communities, where our goal is to improve access to affordable healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity.

THE PROBLEM

Childhood obesity is a serious public health epidemic. During the past four decades, obesity rates have soared among all age groups, increasing more than four times among children ages 6 to 11. Today, nearly a third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese. That's more than 23 million kids and teenagers.

If we don't act to reverse this alarming trend, we're in danger of raising the first generation of American children who will live sicker and die younger than the generation before them. Preventing obesity during childhood is critical, because habits that last into adulthood frequently are formed during youth. Research shows that obese adolescents have up to an 80 percent chance of becoming obese adults.

Overweight and obese children are at higher risk for a host of serious illnesses, including heart disease, stroke, asthma and certain types of cancer. And these children already are being diagnosed with health problems that previously were considered to be "adult" illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. By reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity, we will make our nation healthier and save countless lives.

Obesity also poses a tremendous financial threat to our economy and our health care system. It's estimated that the obesity epidemic costs our nation \$117 billion per year in direct medical expenses and indirect costs, including lost productivity. Childhood obesity alone carries a huge price tag—up to \$14 billion per year in direct health care costs to treat kids.

How did we get to this point?

There's a simple explanation for our nation's obesity epidemic: too many of us do not have a healthy "energy balance." In other words, we're taking in far more calories than we burn, which leads to unhealthy weight gain.



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In fact, today's obese teenagers consume between 700 and 1,000 calories more per day than what's needed for the growth, physical activity and body function of a normal-weight teen. Over the course of 10 years, that "energy gap" is enough to pack an average of 58 extra pounds on an obese adolescent.

As awareness of childhood obesity has grown, so too has our understanding of the many factors that contribute to the epidemic and what we'll need to do to reverse it. We must address the social and environmental factors that contribute to our nation's weight problem.

As a society, we've dramatically altered the way we live, eat, work and play—creating an environment that fuels the obesity epidemic. On average, today's kids spend more than four hours per day consuming electronic media, including television, DVDs and video games. A generation ago, approximately half of all school-age children walked or biked to school. Today, nearly nine out of 10 kids are driven to school. And once they get there, there aren't many opportunities for exercise—fewer than 4 percent of elementary schools provide daily physical education or its equivalent.

At the same time, children are eating more unhealthy foods in ever-larger sizes. In recent decades, the typical calorie content of menu items like French fries and sodas has increased approximately 50 percent. Children consume these high-calorie, low-nutrient foods not only in restaurants, but also in their homes and schools.

In communities hardest hit by obesity, families simply don't have the opportunities they need to make healthy choices. They don't have grocery stores that stock affordable fresh fruits and vegetables. There aren't enough safe places for kids to play or programs to help them be physically active every day. To reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, we must remove these barriers and provide families with better access to healthy choices.

WHAT WE FUND

In support of this core principle, RWJF has developed three integrated strategies: evidence, action, and advocacy.

Investments in building the evidence base will help us to ensure that only the most promising efforts are replicated throughout the nation.

- The Foundation's major research efforts in this area—*Active Living Research*, *Healthy Eating Research* and *Bridging the Gap*—are contributing to the nation's collective knowledge about the changes to policies and to community and school environments that are most effective in increasing physical activity and improving nutrition for kids.
- RWJF also seeks to evaluate innovative approaches under way in states, schools and communities across the country. For instance, RWJF supported an independent evaluation of efforts to implement Arkansas Act 1220, which mandated a comprehensive approach to addressing childhood obesity in public schools. The Foundation also funded a separate initiative to analyze body mass index (BMI) data for all Arkansas public school students. The BMI analysis indicated that, within three years, Arkansas had succeeded in halting the progression of the epidemic in the state.

Our action strategy for communities and schools focuses on engaging partners at the local level, building coalitions, and promoting the most promising approaches.

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- The Foundation is working with The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food. The Food Trust has achieved tremendous success in bringing supermarkets back to underserved communities in Pennsylvania, and we're working together to replicate those results nationwide.
 - We're also working closely with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (a partnership of the American Heart Association and William J. Clinton Foundation) to support its efforts to improve nutrition, physical activity and staff wellness in schools nationwide.
- As we learn from our evidence and action strategies, we share results by educating leaders and investing in advocacy. Effective advocacy motivates elected officials and other community leaders to support important policy changes and helps build a broad national constituency for childhood obesity prevention.
- RWJF supported the National Governors Association (NGA) when Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee designated wellness in schools, homes, and workplaces as his Chairman's Initiative for 2005–2006. To build on this, we're now supporting NGA's Healthy Kids, Healthy America program, which supports the development and implementation of governors' initiatives to prevent childhood obesity.
 - Through our *Leadership for Healthy Communities* initiative, we also work closely with national organizations that represent elected and appointed officials, like the National Conference of State Legislatures and the U.S. Conference of Mayors, to educate their members about successful approaches to increasing physical activity and healthy eating among kids. Our goal is to support leaders and decision-makers in their efforts to create healthier states, counties and cities.

RWJF funds programs and projects to address childhood obesity in the United States and its territories.

WHAT WE DON'T FUND

RWJF is dedicated to changing policies, environments and social norms. Therefore, we generally do not support projects that provide only information or education. Because our emphasis is on preventing obesity, we do not invest in research regarding medical or surgical treatment of obesity. In keeping with Foundation policy, we will give preference to projects developed by public agencies and tax-exempt organizations.

The Childhood Obesity team does not accept unsolicited proposals. We expect to issue specific solicitations for proposals and ideas periodically this year. If you are registered to receive content alerts through the Foundation's Web site, at www.rwjf.org, you will receive notices of funding opportunities through these alerts.

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