

Improving Children's Health through Delaware Child Care Policy

Policy Paper #1 • 2008

Planting the seeds for better health

High Quality Child Care: The Importance of Incorporating Physical Activity and Healthy Eating

SUMMARY

Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health crises facing the nation.¹ Obesity puts children at risk for diabetes and other chronic illnesses and can lead to lifelong health problems, including reduced life expectancy.

Prevention of obesity is the best way to combat this growing health threat. Over one in every five preschoolers in the United States is either at risk for overweight or already overweight.²

The new Delaware child care quality rating system, Delaware Stars for Early Success, can help to address the obesity crisis and assist children in living healthier lives by incorporating promotion of children's health into the system to develop and support high quality child care.

Introduction

Childhood obesity starts young — over one-fifth of children are at risk of overweight or already overweight by the time they enter kindergarten. Prevention of obesity is the best way to combat its increasing prevalence. Children need to develop healthy habits in order to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Experts agree that promoting these habits requires a shift in the way an entire community approaches caring for children.³

This shift should start with the people and organizations that care for the youngest children. Young children now spend significant amounts of time in early care and education programs. In Delaware, the majority of children under age five are cared for during the day by someone other than a parent.⁴ High quality early childhood programs help children to develop strong emotional, social and academic skills. These programs also have potential to improve children's health.

The Need for Change in Child Care Policy and Practice

Child care settings have historically been concerned about children's health and safety. State requirements generally address the need for immunizations, cleanliness, and safety as well as a range of other health issues. In recent years, interest in this area has broadened to include healthy eating and physical activity.⁵

The Need to Promote Healthy Eating

Although little is known about the nutritional quality of foods in child care settings, the few national studies that exist show cause for concern: it is likely that many, if not most, children in child care are receiving too many high calorie, low-nutrient foods and not enough fruits and vegetables.⁶

Delaware is no exception: close to half of the child care centers in Delaware do not serve fruit daily. Close to half do not serve a vegetable daily.⁷ Children enrolled in full-day child care need to

(continued on page 2)

About Nemours Health and Prevention Services

Nemours Health and Prevention Services (NHPS) is a division of Nemours, one of the nation's largest pediatric health systems, operating the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and outpatient facilities throughout the Delaware Valley and northern and central Florida.

The goal of NHPS is to drive long-term improvements in policies and practices that promote child health, and to leverage community strengths and resources to help children grow up healthy. One of our initial areas of emphasis is the prevention of childhood obesity through promotion of healthy lifestyles, the centerpiece of which is the *5-2-1-Almost None* prescription for a healthy lifestyle (see inside for details).





Improving Children's Health thro

Our Formula for a Healthy Lifestyle: 5-2-1-Almost None

Nemours is taking a leading role to help people understand the causes and health implications of obesity and the best ways to promote healthier lifestyles among children and families.

5-2-1-Almost None is our formula for a healthy lifestyle.



- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Spend no more than two hours per day in front of a screen (TV, video games, recreational computer time).
- Get at least one hour of physical activity per day.
- Drink almost no sugary beverages like soda and sports drinks.

(continued from page 1)

meet at least one-half to two-thirds of their energy and nutrient needs while in child care.⁸ It is likely that many child care providers need more information about nutrition; the limited number of studies on this subject suggest that teachers are missing opportunities for promoting healthy eating habits.⁹

The Need to Promote Physical Activity

Research has found that many children in child care settings need more physical activity.¹⁰ Here again, Delaware is no exception: child care centers in this state report that only 41 percent of toddlers and 35 percent of preschoolers are engaged in active play for more than 60 minutes a day.¹¹ Active play has many benefits for young children, from improving their physical health to developing their social, emotional and cognitive skills.¹²

Why Child Care Standards Should Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity

Young children need to acquire healthy habits not only to prevent chronic conditions such as obesity, but also to be prepared for all of the life challenges that await them.

Every young child's developing mind is connected to a developing body. This simple fact is easy to overlook. When we think about a child learning, for instance, we often think about the process as if it occurs only in the head — a misconception that is deeply rooted in our culture.

Healthy Eating

Good nutrition supports not only the physical but also the cognitive development of children.¹³ Many children in Delaware are developing poor eating habits. Early childhood is the most effective period in which to intervene.¹⁴ Child care programs in Delaware are ideally positioned to improve young children's nutrition by providing healthy foods and by educating children, parents and teachers about the importance of healthy eating habits.

Physical Activity

Young children are naturally active. When they have the opportunity for enough physical activity, children benefit physically, psychologically and socially.¹⁵ Scientists are also beginning to investigate precisely how physical activity affects young children's cognitive progress.¹⁶ Decades of research have shown that all aspects of children's development are linked.¹⁷ Increasing the amount of physical activity in child care programs will not only help to prevent obesity, but will also support children's overall healthy development.

The Movement for High Quality Child Care in Delaware

Improving the quality of child care in Delaware is currently a high priority. Delaware Stars for Early Success, Delaware's early childhood plan, proposes an increased state investment in early childhood. Delaware Stars for Early Success is a voluntary quality rating system for child care facilities that is gaining momentum in the state. A quality rating system shifts the focus of child care from basic care to high quality early education.

High Delaware Child Care Policy



In states with quality rating systems, parents and policy makers can assess a child care program according to established standards. A standard in this context is a statement that defines a goal of professional practice. It represents a widely agreed upon, state-of-the-art, high quality level of child care. Some 36 states, including Delaware, have developed quality rating systems; standards vary from state to state.

Delaware Stars for Early Success is in the second year of a pilot implementation program. The system for rating programs and helping providers to make improvements is currently being tested. New quality criteria, such as standards promoting children's health, can be incorporated at this point. Policy makers should take this opportunity to continue the state's recent progress in promoting children's health by strengthening the requirements for quality in child care programs.

Why Delaware Stars for Early Success Should Promote Children's Health

Delaware Stars for Early Success will influence the quality of child care programs in this state for many years to come. This initiative should incorporate criteria that encourage and support child care providers in their efforts to keep children healthy, active, and learning. Specific guidelines on physical activity and healthy eating in the Delaware quality criteria will assist child care providers in designing programs that nurture healthy, lifelong learners.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- 1** Legislation authorizing Delaware Stars for Early Success should explicitly include children's health promotion among the criteria indicating high quality child care.¹⁹
- 2** The Delaware Stars Quality Rating and Improvement System should include strong standards on healthy eating and physical activity as components of Delaware Stars for Early Success.
- 3** Delaware Stars for Early Success should be funded at a level sufficient to promote all of the criteria established for high quality child care.

For more information about NHPS and our work to make Delaware's Children the Healthiest in the Nation, visit: www.growuphealthy.org

Delaware's Progress in Promoting Health through Child Care

In 2007, Delaware took significant steps toward developing a child care system that promotes children's health:

- *The Office of Child Care Licensing* promulgated regulations supported by NHPS that set limits on screen time and establish minimum physical activity standards for licensed child care centers.
- *The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)*, which subsidizes meals and snacks for eligible child care centers, collaborated with NHPS to develop a written guide to the best nutrition practices for child care programs.
- *All sponsors of CACFP in the state*—a wide variety of child care centers and child-serving organizations—have been trained in best practices for child nutrition. CACFP is continuing to promote the widespread adoption of these best practices, and is expected to incorporate some of these practices into key policies.
- *Over 500 child care providers* have participated in voluntary training sessions on healthy eating and physical activity.

252 Chapman Road,
Christiana Building Suite 200
Newark, Delaware 19702
302.444.9100 • 888.494.5252
email: nhps_info@nemours.org
www.GrowUpHealthy.org

Notes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity (Rockville, MD: 2001).
- ² Among children aged two to five, 22.6 percent were at risk for overweight or overweight, according to data collected by that national Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 1999-2002. Hedley, AA, Ogden, CL, Johnson, CL, Carroll, MD, Lurtin, LR, Flegal, KM. Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity Among US Children, Adolescents and Adults, 1999-2002. JAMA 2004, 291,23. Comparable Delaware data are not currently available for the time period covered by the Delaware Survey of Children's Health.
- ³ Ebbeling CB, Pawlak DB, Ludwig, DS. Childhood Obesity: Public Health Crisis, Common Sense Cure. Lancet 2002, 360, 473-82.
- ⁴ 59 percent of Delaware children are in center-based child care and 30 percent are in family based care. National Survey of Children's Health, 2003.
- ⁵ American Academy Of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education (2002). Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs, 2nd edition. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics and Washington, DC: American Public Health Association. Also available at <http://nrc.uchsc.edu>.
- ⁶ Story M, Kaphingst KM, and French S, The Role of Child Care Centers in Obesity Prevention, The Future of Children, 16, 1 (2006) 143-165.
- ⁷ 2006 Delaware Child Care Provider Survey, Nemours Health and Prevention Services, DE
- ⁸ The American Dietetic Association recommends that food served to children in child care for a full day meet at least one-half to two-thirds of their daily needs for energy and nutrients. Story, 2006.
- ⁹ Healthy Eating Research, Promoting Good Nutrition and Physical Activity in Child-Care Settings, A Research Brief, May 2007.
- ¹⁰ R Pate and others, Physical Activity among Children Attending Preschools, Pediatrics 114, 5, (2004), 1258-63.
- ¹¹ 2006 Delaware Child Care Provider Survey, Nemours Health and Prevention Services, DE.
- ¹² HL Burdette, RC Whitaker, Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children, Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 2005; 159:46-50.
- ¹³ Numerous studies demonstrate that malnutrition, even with no clinical signs, affects academic performance. See: Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy: Statement on the Link between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children, Medford, MA: Tufts University School of Nutrition.
- ¹⁴ American Academy of Pediatrics. Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children and Adolescents, Third Edition, 2008, p.116.
- ¹⁵ Burdette and Whitaker, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Timmons BW, Naylor P and Pfeiffer, KA, Physical Activity for Preschool Children—How Much and How? Canadian Journal of Public Health 98 (Suppl. 2), 2007.
- ¹⁷ Ramey CT and Ramey SL Right from Birth: Building Your Child's Foundation for Life, Goddard Press, 1999.
- ¹⁸ These training sessions were sponsored by NHPS and community entities.
- ¹⁹ A forthcoming issue brief from NHPS will address the case for incorporating promotion of emotional health as a component of quality.



Printed on recycled paper

