



Parents' Views on Fitness, Nutrition and Overweight/Obesity among Delaware's Children and Teens

- Results from a Statewide Poll -

Nemours Health and Prevention Services (NHPS) commissioned Lake Research Partners (LRP) to conduct this survey with Delaware parents about obesity, fitness, and nutrition issues among the state's children. The poll explored parents' views of these issues and their opinions about various policy options to fight obesity in children and teens.¹ This statewide survey of 807 parents with children under age 18 was conducted January 4 – 9, 2006. The main findings include:

- Most Delaware parents consider poor nutrition, a lack of exercise and too many children being overweight and obese to be serious problems, on a par with cigarette smoking, accidents, and drug and alcohol abuse. Moreover, the majority of parents realize that obesity among the state's children and teens is an ongoing problem.
- Parents unanimously believe that parents themselves should play the primary role in fighting childhood obesity. However, they also believe that other entities – including schools, healthcare providers, and those who market food and drinks to young people – have a role to play in fighting childhood obesity.
- Parents support a number of policies and programs aimed at fighting childhood obesity. Majorities support teaching about obesity, fitness, and nutrition as part of health education classes, and having more physical education in schools. Most also favor opening school facilities so that parents and children have a safe place to exercise in the evening. Parents also see a role for childcare centers; most are in favor of requiring childcare centers to follow rules about the amount of physical activity children engage in and the nutritional content of the foods being served.

¹ Parents were also surveyed about their own children's health and fitness behaviors. These results will be shared in subsequent dispatches.

- The majority of parents – regardless of political party – say they are willing to support policies and programs to promote healthy eating and exercise and reduce obesity, even if it means paying higher state taxes.

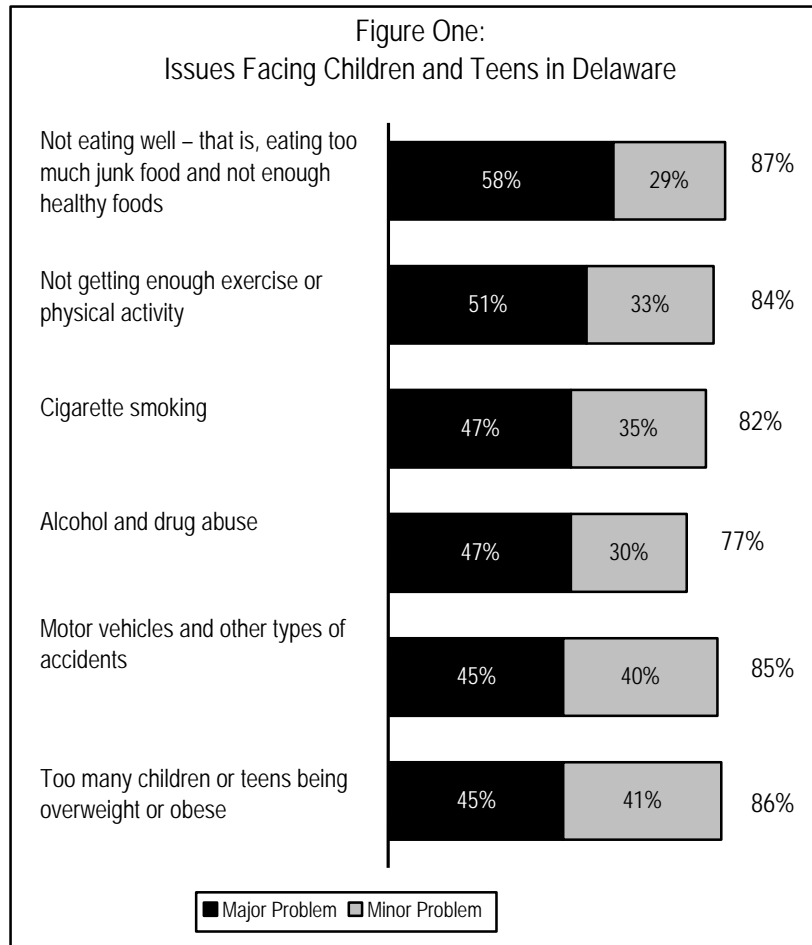
These and other survey results can be found in detail on the following pages.

Delaware parents consider poor nutrition, a lack of exercise and too many children being overweight and obese to be serious problems, on par with cigarette smoking, accidents and drug and alcohol abuse.

Almost nine in ten parents consider “not eating well – that is, eating too much junk food and not enough healthy foods” to be a problem for Delaware’s children and teens; including six in ten (58%) who consider it a major problem. Eighty-four percent of parents believe that children not getting enough exercise is a problem for Delaware youth, including half (51%) who believe it is a major problem. Almost nine in ten (86%) consider “too many children and teens being overweight or obese” a problem. Forty-five percent believe it is a major problem.

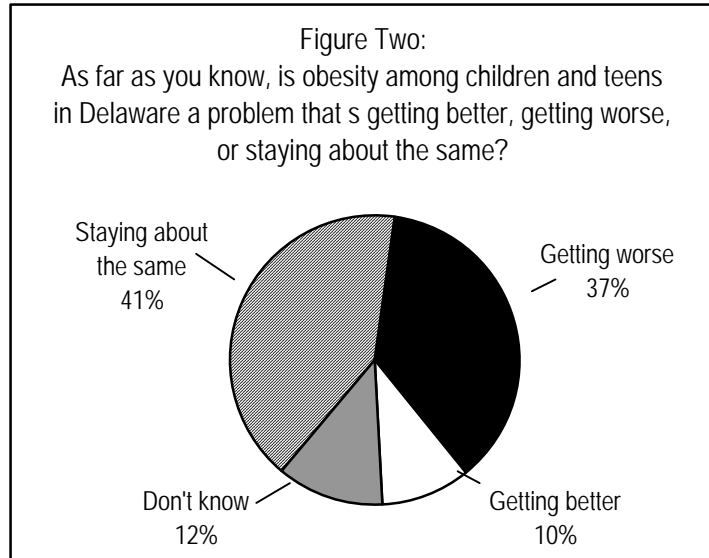
Mothers are slightly more likely than fathers to consider these issues problematic, though even among fathers there is significant concern.

There are some interesting generational differences here. Older parents tend to be more concerned than younger parents about poor eating habits and a lack of physical activity. However, they do not differ in their views on the seriousness of overweight/obesity.



Delaware parents are aware that obesity among children and teens in Delaware is a problem that is not on the mend. Only 10% say this is a problem that is getting better. Four in ten (41%) say it is staying about the same, and more than a third (37%) believe this problem is getting worse.

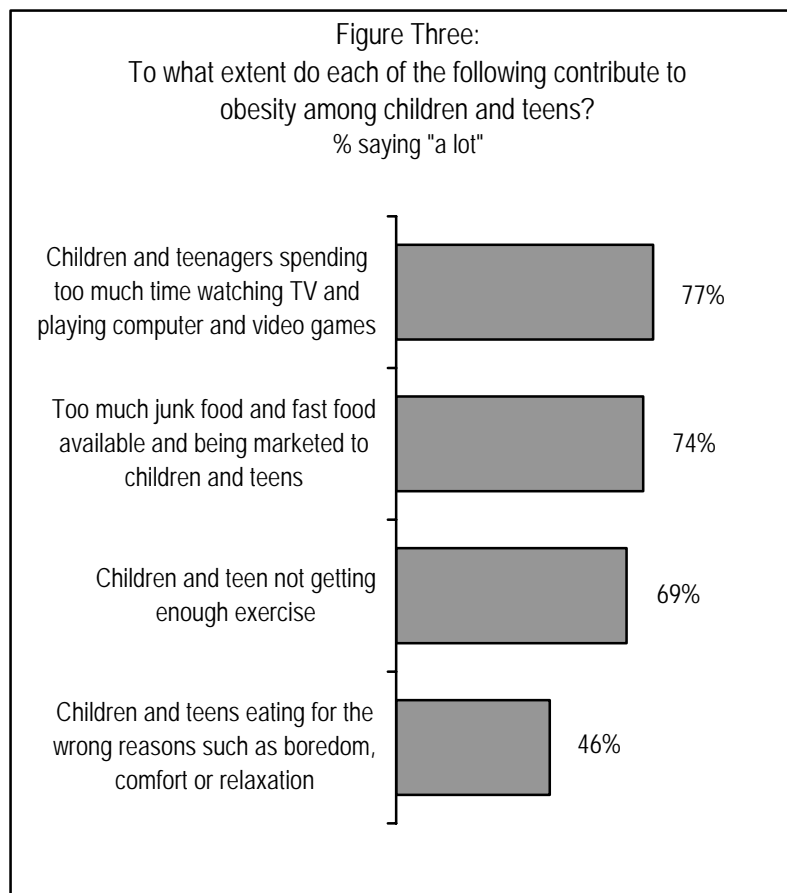
White parents (40%) are more likely to feel that childhood obesity is an increasing problem than African-American (31%) and Hispanic parents (28%).



Most parents know that poor eating habits, a lack of physical activity, and too much screen time contribute to obesity among children and teens. They are a little less convinced about the role of "emotional" eating.

Almost eight in ten (77%) parents believe that “children and teenagers spending too much time watching TV and playing computer and video games” contributes a lot to obesity among children and teens. Three-quarters of parents believe “too much junk food and fast food available and being marketed to children and teens” contributes a lot to obesity.

Seven in ten parents (69%) say that “children and teens not getting enough exercise” contributes a lot to childhood obesity.



Delaware parents are somewhat less convinced that “children and teens eating for the wrong reasons, such as boredom, comfort, or relaxation” contributes to emotional eating. Less than half of parents surveyed (46%) believe this is a major contributor.

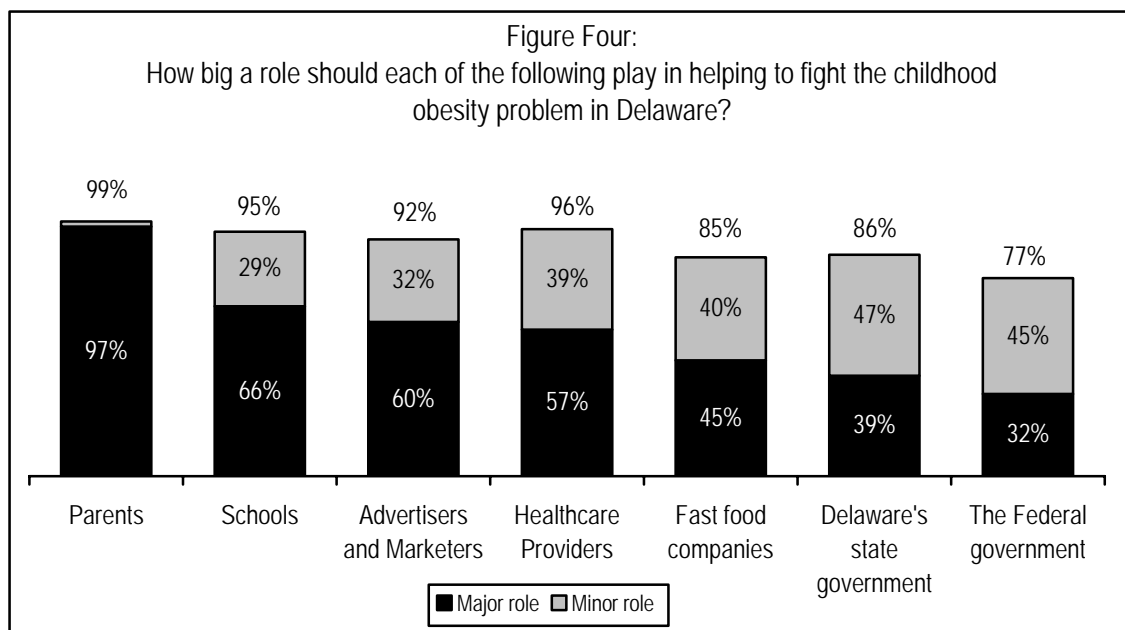
There are some interesting gender differences regarding factors that contribute to obesity. Mothers are somewhat more likely than fathers to believe screen time contributes a lot to obesity (81% vs. 71%). Mothers are also more likely than fathers to consider marketing a major contributor (79% vs. 67%). Mothers and fathers do not differ significantly in their opinions on the effects of lack of exercise and emotional eating.

There are also some interesting racial and ethnic differences in opinions. Hispanic parents (68%) are less likely than whites (78%) and African-Americans (77%) to feel screen time is a major contributor. Hispanic parents (57%) are also less likely than whites (71%) and African-Americans (68%) to feel lack of exercise is a major contributor.

Parents believe parents themselves should play the primary role in fighting childhood obesity, but they also see a role for others.

Almost all parents (97%) believe parents should play a major role in helping to fight the childhood obesity problem in Delaware. (Figure Four) Far more believe parents have a major role to play than hold any other organization or institution to that standard.

Parents also see a role for schools. Over nine in ten (95%) believe schools have a role to play, including two-thirds (66%) who believe schools should play a *major* role. African-American parents (78%), especially those living in Wilmington (92%), are more likely than others to see a major role for schools. Democrats, mothers and those with lower-



incomes also tend to see a more significant role for schools. Differences here are more of degree than of direction; the majority of Republican parents (57%) believe schools have a significant role to play in fighting childhood obesity. Moreover, as the next sections show, parents of all political stripes see specific ways in which the educational system can help fight childhood obesity.

More than nine in ten parents (92%) see a role for “those who advertise and market foods and drinks to children and teenagers,” including six in ten (60%) who see a major role for marketers. Interestingly, parents see somewhat less of a role for fast food companies. Though eight in ten (85%) believe fast food companies have a role to play, less than half (45%) see this as a major role.

The majority of parents (96%) believe that healthcare providers should help in the fight against obesity among Delaware’s children and teens. Almost six in ten (57%) believe healthcare providers have a major role to play.

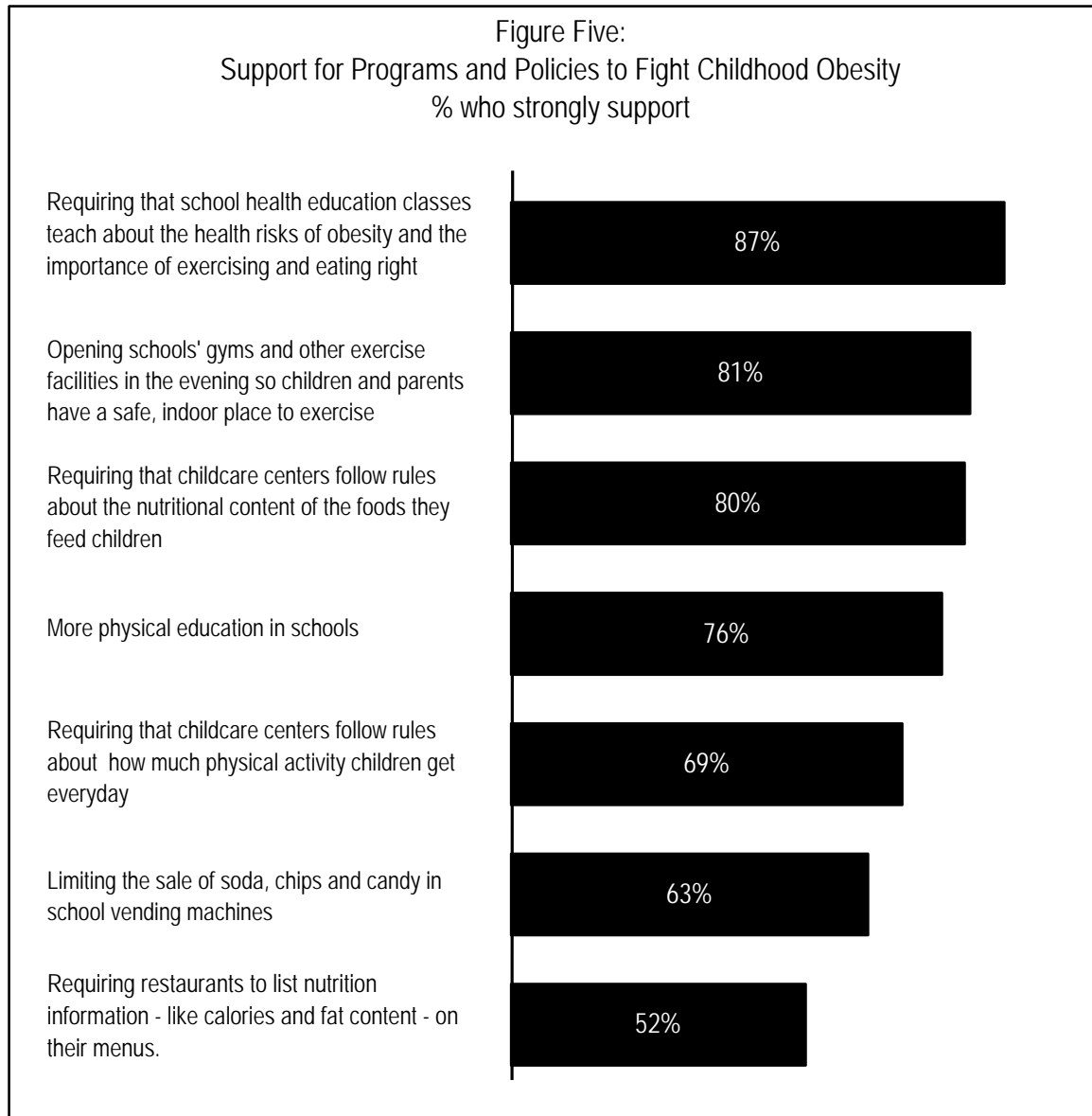
While most parents see a role for the state (86%) and federal (77%) government, less than half believe either of these parties should play a major role. However, as the next sections show, there is broad support for a number of policies and programs aimed at fighting obesity. Moreover, the majority of parents are willing to pay more in state taxes to support programs and policies aimed at promoting healthy life-styles for Delaware’s children and teenagers.

Parents support a wide range of policies and programs to fight childhood obesity.

Parents see several ways in which schools can help in this struggle. (Figure Five) Almost nine in 10 (87%) strongly support having school health education classes teach about the health risks of obesity and the importance of exercising and eating right. Three-quarters of those surveyed (76%) strongly favor increased physical education. Both of these approaches have broad support across all demographic groups.

Eight in ten (81%) strongly support opening schools' gyms and other exercise facilities in the evening so children and parents have a safe, indoor place to exercise. African-American parents (92%) and parents under age 30 (91%) are especially supportive of this idea. Parents who say that access to safe places to play in their communities is limited are also especially enthusiastic about this idea (84%). However, even among those parents who say they have plenty of access to parks and playground the large majority (77%) support the idea of opening school facilities in the evenings.

Over six in ten parents (63%) strongly favor limiting the sale of soda, chips and candy in school vending machines. Mothers (69%), parents over age 30 (65%), and parents who believe the obesity epidemic is getting worse (70%) are more supportive of limiting vending machine sales than their counterparts.



Parents also see a role for Delaware's childcare centers. Eight in ten (80%) strongly support requiring childcare centers to follow rules about the nutritional content of the foods they serve. African-American parents (88%) and mothers (86%) are especially supportive of this idea. Seven in ten (69%) strongly support requiring childcare centers to insure that children get a certain amount of physical activity each day.

Half the parents surveyed (52%) say they strongly support requiring restaurants to list nutritional information on their menus. Those who live within close proximity to a fast food references are somewhat more likely than those who do not to support this idea (56% vs. 45%).

Most Delaware high schools have wellness centers – that is, on-site health clinics where students can get free health care and counseling, as long as they have their parents'

consent. In a separate question, parents were asked whether and to what extent they would favor or oppose expanding this program so that there are wellness programs in the state's middle schools. More than eight in ten (85%) would favor expanding this program, including six in ten (63%) who strongly favor doing so. African-Americans (79%), single mothers (77%) and those with annual household incomes under \$30,000 (82%) are especially likely to say they strongly favor expanding the wellness center program.

It is worth noting that those parents who self-identify as Democrats tend to be somewhat more supportive of these policies and programs than Republicans and, to a lesser extent, than political independents. There are two exceptions. Republican, Democratic and independents parents do not differ in their support for teaching students about fitness and nutrition, nor do they differ on the question of limiting vending machines sales. It is also important to note that the partisan differences that do exist are a matter of degree, not direction. The majorities of Republican parents say they strongly support all the measure listed in Figure Five except requiring restaurants to print nutrition information in their menus.

Most parents are willing to support policies and programs to promote healthy eating and exercise and reduce obesity, even if it means higher state taxes.

The majority of parents – a full two-thirds (68%) – say they are willing to pay more in state taxes to support programs and policies to promote healthy eating and physical activity and to reduce obesity among Delaware's children and teens.

Democrats (79%), and to lesser extent independent parents (70%) are more likely to say they would be willing to see an increase in their tax bill than Republicans are (57%). However, even among Republican parents more are willing to pay (57%) than are unwilling to do so (41%).

