

## Success Story

# Strong from the Start: Transforming Nutrition and Physical Activity Practices in Georgia Childcare Sites

### Background

The first five years of a child's life play a vital role in their lifelong health and well-being. Because of the importance of this initial stage, early care and education (ECE) centers and family child care homes provide a unique learning environment to establish a strong foundation for children's lifelong healthy habits. Integrating everyday learning opportunities that encourage healthy eating and physical activity is essential to children's long-term health and well-being.

With support from the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Technical Assistance Program (HKHF TAP), HealthMPowers, a nonprofit organization that promotes healthy habits to build a better future for all children, partnered with 40 Georgia ECE sites to transform their nutrition and physical activity practices, policies, and environments. HKHF TAP is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and led by Nemours Children's Health to embed healthy eating and physical activity best practices in ECE<sup>1</sup>.

### Georgia Nutrition and Physical Activity Assessment

HealthMPowers collaborates with stakeholders, including governmental agencies, universities, advocacy groups, professional associations and coalitions, providers, and other nonprofit organizations to improve nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in ECE settings. The Georgia Nutrition and Physical Activity (GaNPA) Assessment is the central tool in HealthMPowers' comprehensive approach to enhancing the integration of nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in ECE settings across the state. Developed by Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), HealthMPowers and other partners, the GaNPA Assessment is a comprehensive online platform designed for ECE providers to assess and track their progress while setting and achieving goals towards improving healthy practices and policies at their sites.



*Apparo Academy in Augusta, Georgia*

### Reach for the Stars Learning Collaborative

HealthMPowers developed the Reach for the Stars Learning Collaborative (RSLC) to accelerate adoption of nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in ECE settings. The RSLC's series of statewide trainings for ECE providers aims to create healthier environments for children, staff, and families by addressing the content of the GaNPA Assessment. RSLC participants receive up to 30 continuing education training hours, nutrition and physical activity educational resources, technical assistance (TA), and mentoring.

Participants also receive personalized nutrition and physical activity assessment reports with their ECE sites' strengths and areas for improvement based on their GaNPA Assessment results.

<sup>1</sup> Nemours Children's Health is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) under a five-year Cooperative Agreement (6NU38OT000304-03-01) to support state ECE organizations to integrate best practices and standards for healthy eating, physical activity, breastfeeding support, and reducing screen time in ECE systems and settings. The views expressed in written materials or publications do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

To gain diverse perspectives from the ECE field and create an enriching learning environment for participants, HealthMPowers considered sites' enrollment, participants' roles in the ECE sector and their geographic locations, among other factors. HealthMPowers selected 40 centers and family homes out of 135 applicants to participate in the RSLC from May to September 2021. Across 24 counties with rural, urban, and suburban communities, 90 individuals participated from the 40 sites, which ranged in size from two to 243 children served. Approximately one third of participants were site directors and owners, another third were teachers, and a final third were other staff, including cooks, assistant teachers, and program directors.

## Results

Nearly 80 percent of the ECE sites completed the entire five-month RSLC virtual training series. All sites that completed the full training (31 sites) reported improvements in at least one nutrition or physical activity indicator in the GaNPA Assessment. Specifically:

- 87 percent of sites improved nutrition practices or policies;
- 67 percent of sites made improved physical activity practices and policies; and
- 71 percent improved in both nutrition and physical activity practices and policies.

These results could potentially impact nearly 3,000 children at the participating RSLC sites.

### Program Impact: Apparo Academy

One of the programs that saw significant improvements from the RSLC was Apparo Academy. Through their participation, Apparo learned ways to improve their policies and practices. Located in Augusta, Apparo is an ECE center that offers healthcare and educational services, such as nursing and therapy, for both neurotypical and neurodivergent children, as well as children with developmental delays and disabilities. Of the 40 children enrolled at Apparo, 60 percent have special needs and receive specialized support from teachers and staff. As a result of participating in the RSLC, Apparo enhanced their program's services by offering more nutrition and physical activity opportunities for children, staff, and families. Improvements included:

*"I want to thank each of you for the time and attention that you put into this course. It was a great course and you did an amazing job. I appreciate all of the resources and ideas that will help make Apparo better for our families."*

- Jennifer Jones, Executive Director  
Apparo Academy

- Removing food as a behavior management incentive and instead focusing on exploring food for nutritional purposes, such as taste testing with sensory exploration;
- Providing monthly nutrition education for staff and families, including family activities and written materials; and
- Providing at least 30 minutes of structured, teacher-led physical activity, including use of adaptive equipment such as bumpy balls.

In addition to these improvements, Apparo has expanded breastfeeding and infant feeding support for staff and families by including a designated breastfeeding area in their new facility, which is scheduled to open later this year.

Based on evaluation feedback and focus groups, RSLC participants felt supported, engaged, and enthusiastic about making and sustaining improvements to their nutrition and physical activity practices and policies at their sites. Participating ECE providers commented that they now feel they have the knowledge, tools, and resources necessary to integrate healthy nutrition and physical activity concepts and strategies into their daily teaching practices and their physical ECE settings.

### What's next?

HealthMPowers is using data from the RSLC and the GaNPA Assessment to enhance their training and resources for providers while aligning state-level ECE systems across Georgia. To ensure ECE sites have less competing goals and requirements to meet, HealthMPowers is working with state partners to integrate the GaNPA Assessment standards into Georgia's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). As part of their continuing HKHF TAP work with Nemours Children's Health, HealthMPowers and its partners aim to streamline these state ECE systems and provide healthy child care for all of Georgia's children to ensure they are nourished and active from the start.

To learn more about this success story, please contact [danielle.adamson@healthmpowers.org](mailto:danielle.adamson@healthmpowers.org) or to learn more about HKHF TAP, e-mail [hkhftap@nemours.org](mailto:hkhftap@nemours.org).