

## Key Lessons from the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Webinar: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Research

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The Healthy Kids, Healthy Future: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood webinar series explores how to leverage early care and education settings to achieve equitable health outcomes by highlighting opportunities and advances in policy, research, philanthropy, and innovation. Access a [recording of the webinar](#) and review [speaker slides](#). This is a synopsis of the webinar on research.

Early care and education (ECE) is an important setting for promoting equitable health outcomes in early childhood by utilizing best practices in healthy eating and physical activity and participating in child nutrition programs that promote food security. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated equity and food security challenges, however, there are opportunities to take the lessons learned during the COVID-19 emergency as well as current interest in helping ECE systems recover to better serve young children and families. There is a growing body of literature measuring the positive impact of nutrition programs and other obesity prevention interventions in early childhood and the important pathway ECE programs can provide for delivering these interventions.

### **There are a variety of effective and equitable obesity prevention strategies in early care and education settings**

- **Policy and environmental interventions in early care and education (ECE) settings have the strongest evidence of obesity prevention**

Research has found that programs that support ECE systems to improve and adopt best practices and policies encouraging healthy eating and physical activity—such as the National Early Care and Education Learning Collaboratives (ECELC), Healthy Apple, and Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAPSACC)—are the most effective in reducing weight for young children and improving practices in ECE programs. Modelling by the CHOICES program based at Harvard University also found that quality improvement strategies which provide the necessary training, technical assistance, and/or other resources (e.g., learning collaboratives), support early educators in providing high-quality child care that nurtures healthy habits.

- **The Child and Adult Food Program (CACFP) is a promising approach to improving nutrition and addressing food insecurity among young children**

The Child and Adult Food Program (CACFP) is an effective program for reducing food insecurity and providing healthy food options to young children from families with low incomes by subsidizing the costs of healthy meals and snacks offered by ECE programs. Programs participating in CACFP have been shown to serve healthier menus to children (than non-participating sites) resulting in the consumption of fewer sugary drinks and more vegetables and milk. CACFP also promotes equitable health outcomes with its broad reach to almost 5 million young children from families with low incomes.

- **High quality ECE programs promote positive child health outcomes**

Head Start and Early Head Start provide high quality ECE programming with a focus on healthy growth and development to children from families with low incomes. Emerging research has found that enrollment in Head Start and Early Head Start is associated with improved weight trajectories for children, helping those with either obesity or underweight move towards a healthy weight. A recent longitudinal study conducted a 37-year follow-up of adults who were enrolled in high quality ECE programs as children and found reductions for obesity risk into adulthood. However, practices in Head Start for measuring BMI and discussing obesity risk with caregivers varies significantly due to limited time, resources, and staff training. Current research is developing best practices for measuring BMI and communicating obesity risk to caregivers.

## **Obesity prevention programs require effective implementation to achieve equitable outcomes**

- **Incorporating obesity prevention best practices in ECE state standards requires additional supports and resources to ensure optimal implementation**

In order to translate ECE licensing requirements and quality rating and improvement standards into practice, many ECE programs, especially those in under-resourced communities, need follow-up support and guidance through technical assistance or coaching. Many states do not currently have sufficient resources available to help ECE programs integrate healthy eating and physical activity best practices into their program operations. Without resources to support implementation to ensure all children in ECE programs are provided with healthy food and physical activity opportunities, equity gaps can persist.

- **Adopting responsive feeding practices encourages children to eat healthy foods provided through nutrition programs**

Many ECE programs have improved the nutritional quality of foods served, however, research finds many children are still not meeting dietary recommendations. ECE programs, especially under-resourced programs, need support (e.g., training and follow-up guidance) to implement responsive feeding practices and educate caregivers on how to model and encourage children to eat healthy foods and address food refusal.

## **More research is needed to support implementation of evidence-based practices and interventions to promote equity**

- **Research should explore how to increase enrollment and participation in federal nutrition programs**

Only a small proportion of eligible ECE programs and families participate in federal nutrition programs. Additional research is needed on effective ways to increase enrollment and participation in ECE programs, including understanding strategies to eliminate barriers to enrollment, such as excessive paperwork. For example, broadening the reach of a federal nutrition education program such as SNAP-Ed to connect to the 90 million eligible Americans (currently 3 million reached), would enhance equitable access to the program, information, and support. SNAP-Ed provides states with funding for evidence-based nutrition education and health promotion interventions at multiple levels: individual or group, organization or institution, and community and public health level. States can also use SNAP-Ed funds to test interventions classified as having “emerging evidence” with the goal of identifying interventions that can be implemented on a larger scale to reach more people who would benefit. There are opportunities for SNAP-Ed to be reimagined to provide greater reach in ECE.

- **Studies should examine the long-term impact of early childhood obesity prevention interventions**

Most research examines the impact of early childhood obesity prevention interventions over 10 years or less. Some early childhood obesity prevention approaches have demonstrated impact on adult obesity risk, but more research is needed to understand the long-term health impacts and cost-effectiveness of promising interventions. Understanding the long-term positive impacts may make a compelling case for additional investment in early childhood obesity prevention and extending their reach to more children.