Out-of-school time programs face barriers to healthful eating

But organizations can employ strategies that put children, youth on path to good nutrition

By Jean L. Wiecha and Georgia Hall

Diet and physical activity are important in promoting healthy weights and preventing chronic disease. Among American children, 31.7 percent are overweight or obese.\(^1\) Although prevalence varies by age, sex and ethnicity, all groups are affected.\(^1\) Childhood obesity — at 16.9 percent among 2- to 19-year-olds — is associated with concurrent hypertension, dyslipidemia and type 2 diabetes\(^2\) and increases risk of obesity and chronic disease during adulthood.\(^3\)

Specific childhood dietary practices promote healthy weights. These include reducing the intake of sugar-sweetened beverages\(^4,5\) and foods containing trans fats, added sugar and refined grains.\(^6\)

The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily, a healthful breakfast, letting children self-regulate intake and engaging the whole family in healthful habits.\(^2\) Every organization that feeds children can employ these dietary strategies and nurture healthy eating. Out-of-school time (OST) programs serve more than 8 million children per year\(^7\) and are a promising setting for reinforcing healthful eating habits.

NIOST, along with research partners University of Massachusetts at Boston and the YMCA of the USA, recently identified and interviewed 17 key OST organizations that provide, coordinate or improve services and/or conduct policy or advocacy work on behalf of large OST provider networks. Interview respondents were highly concerned about childhood obesity and healthful eating as an important component of their work.

Participants identified many barriers to serving healthful foods and beverages in OST including food procurement and facilities. How programs get their food is an important determinant of what they serve. There were three main methods: purchasing their own food, receiving snacks through the school food service department as part of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), or participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) for low-income communities.

Programs that purchase their own food have more choices but may face difficulties allocating staff time to shopping and balancing cost savings with healthfulness. Also, several participants noted that programs in inner-city, low-income neighborhoods often have limited access to stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables. The families they serve also live in these neighborhoods, so the absence of supermarkets with fresh food at competitive prices affects the program menu and the families’ purchasing patterns. Interview respondents describing programs that obtain snacks from the local school food service (SFS) department through NSLP noted they generally do not

Activities can help children, youth develop awareness of ingredients, products

**Editor's note:** The following activities from Lisa Leake, creator of 100 Days of Real Food, can be conducted with children and youth to help them investigate product claims and learn what is in their food.

- **Processed foods are an illusion, often appearing to be healthy (with claims of low fat, low carb, vitamin fortified, no trans fat, contains omega-3s, etc.) when these foods are the very thing making a lot of Americans unhealthy, sick and fat.**

  **Put it to the test:** Investigate how many grams of whole grains are in packaged foods that have a “health claim” on the front stating that it contains whole grains. How close to 100 percent is it?

- **The food industry has proven that it is not very good at sea-soning our foods by adding way too much salt, sugar, and/or oil to almost everything.**

  **Put it to the test:** Examine the sugar count in chocolate milk and flavored yogurt. Measure out how many teaspoons of sugar that is (hint: 4 grams = 1 teaspoon of sugar).

- **It is estimated that up to 90 percent of processed foods in the supermarket contain either a corn or soy ingredient in the form of an additive under a variety of different names. Now how is that for eating variety?**

  **Put it to the test:** Write down names of common food additives in packaged foods (such as maltodextrin and high-