

## SEDENTARY PRACTICES IN HEAD START AND EARLY HEAD START

Prepared by: Betsy Thigpen, Early Education and Management Specialist

In a time when childhood obesity is rising at an alarming rate and challenging behaviors appear rampant in our classrooms, Head Start will do well to rethink many of its current practices that tend to encourage sedentary habits and lifestyles. There is little disagreement that children learn best through exploration, discovery, play, and hand-on activities. But in our passion to *prepare children for school*, we often resort to teaching strategies that are appropriate primarily for older children.

### Factors that Contribute to Sedentary Practices

Let's examine some of the factors that contribute to our children's growing sedentary lifestyles:

- There is a widespread perception that children are innately active even when adults do not provide environments that encourage activity, motion, and movement. Actually, research shows that children are active only for short periods each day unless adults are intentional in keeping them active.
- Teachers often do not recognize overweight and obesity issues as reasons to refer children for further evaluation and intervention.
- Though children are more active in the out-of-doors than indoors, there has been an increasing trend in the U.S. over the last 20 years to reduce time spent outside.
- We "talk the talk" – children learn best through exploration, discovery, and play experiences – but, we often fail to "walk the walk" by setting up learning for children using a teacher-directed, isolated skill regiment.
- Parents and teachers tend to overuse strollers, bye-bye buggies, and other restrictive equipment instead of allowing children to walk and move around in unrestricted ways.
- Some have narrowed the definition of school readiness to a few isolated skills plus the ability to stand in line, wait, listen, and be still, and far too much time is devoted to imposing these "readiness skills" on our youngest children.
- There is an increasing inappropriate use of circle and large group time for learning activities such as calendars, letter (shape, color, etc.) of the week, and other skill-related tasks that need to be more appropriately individualized to each child.
- Too many playgrounds are flat, bland and boring, and do not offer the amount of "reasonable risk" required for healthy physical development.

### Obesity and Sedentary Habits

In a time when obesity has been identified by the U.S. Surgeon General as the most serious health problem in the U.S., it is critical that Head Start and Early Head Start rethink the needs of young children, especially the need for frequent and ongoing physical activity. Though nutrition is an important factor in addressing obesity, pediatricians do not usually recommend dieting for

overweight young children and generally agree that physical activity as a response to childhood obesity is a safer, more reasonable, and less invasive intervention, not only to address obesity, but to prevent overweight and obesity in adolescence and adulthood.

The level of obesity in young children has risen dramatically over the last 20 years and has now reached epidemic proportions. In 2000, over 10% of two-to-five year old children in the U.S. were considered obese and the number continues to rise. Percentages of overweight and obese African-American children, Hispanic children, and children from low socio-economic backgrounds are significantly higher than for other children. Calling attention to the obesity issue now affecting even infants and toddlers, the September 2007 issue of *Zero to Three* focused its entire publication on obesity and overweight in our youngest children.

### **Challenging Behaviors and Sedentary Environments**

In addition to the concerns of obesity and overweight among young children, there is the growing concern of challenging behaviors faced by most classroom teachers today. Impulsivity, inattention, and aggression are frequently reported by Head Start teachers as challenges in managing their classrooms. Children are often over-referred for challenging behaviors because of inappropriate expectations and unreasonable requests for restraint and silence.

A growing body of research shows that more time and activity spent in naturalized settings reduces many of the undesirable behavioral characteristics associated with ADHD such as impulsivity and inattention. More exposure to green settings appears to be a potential promising alternative to medication and invasive treatment in addressing these issues.

### **Too Little Time Outside**

Though outside play has been found to be the strongest correlate of physical activity in young children and green environments promise to reduce inappropriate behaviors, the *lack of time* spent outside on any given day in Head Start classrooms is a major cause for concern when considering the physical needs of young children. In a survey of 312 North Carolina child care centers, including Head Start, researcher, Robin Moore found that on average, children spend only 60-75 minutes outside as part of their ten-hour day.

In 2004, researchers Pfeiffer, Trost, Ziegler, and Dowda found that children in child care and Head Start spend far too little time engaged in vigorous physical activity during the hours they attend the center. The study revealed that children spent only 4-10 minutes per hour engaging in vigorous physical activity while at the center. A survey of parents found that children were unlikely to spend enough additional physical activity at home to compensate for the inadequate activity in centers. A closer examination of center practices revealed both center policies and practices impact the amount of children's physical activity.

### **Head Start's Window of Opportunity**

When one examines the sedentary *practices* of many of our classrooms across the country, only one conclusion can be reached: Many children are not only sedentary for a large portion of the day, but motion and movement in many classrooms, and even the out-of-doors, is actually restricted.

Serving almost one million children birth-to-five years of age, Head Start and Early Head Start have a unique window of opportunity to address the growing childhood obesity issue among young children by assuring that children are frequently engaged in physical movement and activity and that learning and development opportunities are offered in ways that keep children moving. In addition, physical movement and activity, especially in the out-of-doors, promises to be an effective response in reducing impulsivity, inattention, aggression, and other challenging behaviors being faced by Head Start teachers on a daily basis.

In rethinking our increasing sedentary practices, perhaps the best place to start is the recognition that young children need frequent and ongoing motion, movement, and activity for most of their day. In addition, as Richard Louv emphasizes in his book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, “direct exposure to nature and the out-of-doors is essential for healthy childhood development – physical, emotional, and spiritual.” A close examination of our policies, schedules, and environments may likely reveal that in practice, we actually encourage inactivity and sedentary habits in our classrooms, and that we lack intentionality in using the outdoor play area as a valuable learning and development environment.

### **Promising Initiatives**

There is a growing movement across the U.S. that recognizes the needs of children for adequate physical activity and outdoor play. In 2002, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) released the first physical activity guidelines specifically designed to meet the developmental needs of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The document provides teachers, parents, caregivers and health care professionals with guidelines that address the kinds of physical activity, the environment and the individuals responsible for facilitating the physical activity.

The Office of Head Start has identified childhood obesity and outdoor play as a major priority for the near future. The Office funded The Head Start Body Start National Center for Development and Outdoor Play in September 2008 with a \$12 million grant from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to increase a broad range of services aimed at increasing physical activity, outdoor play, and healthy eating for Head Start children, their families and staff. The center is administrated by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR), and the Associations of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD). The National Center will provide training, technical assistance, and grants of up to \$5,000 to local Head Start centers to improve their outdoor play spaces. About 1500 grants (380 per year) will be given out through a request for proposals process.

Current stimulus funding, as well as the grants described above, offer unprecedented opportunities for Head Start to redesign playgrounds that reconnect children to nature and maximize physical, social/emotional, and cognitive development.

## References

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Additional information can be found at:

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