

Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

RESEARCH BRIEF

December 2011

A Family-Centered Program to Promote Wellness for Latino Children

Introduction

Obesity and its health complications are a growing problem among Mexican-American children.¹ Given that the Hispanic population is expected to grow by 188 percent from 2000 to 2050,² the health and well-being of Mexican-American children is an important policy consideration. Comprehensive childhood obesity prevention programs that recruit entire families to participate, rather than just children, could help Latino children and adults lead healthier lives.³ But building family resiliency and strength, and acknowledging how existing patterns of daily life may foster healthy habits, have been strikingly absent from past research and program and policy development.⁴ Research focusing on the Latino family unit would benefit efforts to reduce childhood obesity, especially given Latinos' strong cultural belief in family strength and unity.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

Our Salud America! pilot research project, “Abriendo Caminos (Clearing the Path),” takes a family-based approach—accounting for developmental patterns of behavior and practices in early mealtime experiences. The goal is to prevent childhood obesity and promote wellbeing among Spanish-speaking families in non-metropolitan communities in Illinois, a state which has experienced two-fold growth of Latino families over the past 10 years. Abriendo Caminos assumes that sustainable health promotion requires building on existing family strengths. The program seeks to build positive connections between healthy habits and family life to promote healthy eating and joint physical activity, preserve family traditions, and build stronger relationships between Latino children and their parents. The 6-week curriculum actively involves Latino families in food preparation, shared physical activity emphasizing culturally-tailored elements (e.g., folk-dancing), and shared mealtimes featuring family storytelling and scrapbooking. Of the 62 participating Latino families with

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PEER REVIEW

Peer review for this research brief was conducted by *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee Member James Sallis, Ph.D., professor of psychology at San Diego State University and director of Active Living Research, an RWJF national program.

For more information about *Salud America!*, visit

www.salud-america.org

¹ Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, Lamb MM and Flegal KM. “Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents, 2007–2008.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 303(3): 242–249, 2010.

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2004.

³ Gruber KJ, Haldeman LA. “Using the family to combat childhood and adult obesity.” *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 6(3): 2009. http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2009/jul/08_0191.htm. (Accessed January 2011).

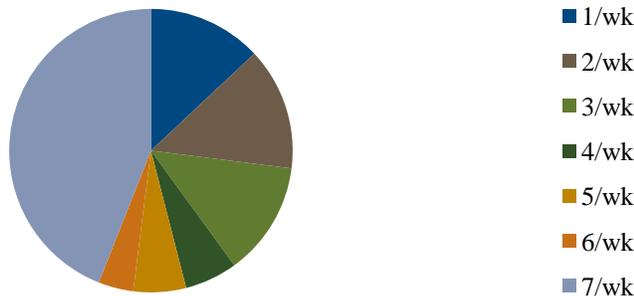
⁴ Fiese B H. *Family Routines and Rituals*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.



elementary school children from communities in Champaign County, Ill., 32 have completed pre- and post-test assessments. Preliminary baseline findings include:

- Fewer than half of Latino families are eating meals together seven days a week.** Forty-eight percent of Latino families ate meals together six or seven days per week, below the 2007 national average of 54 percent among families with children ages 6-11. Families in our study were also less likely to share meals than the average Latino family nationwide, 58 percent of which shared a meal on six or seven days of the week in 2007, a higher percentage than other ethnic groups.⁵ National patterns indicate a downward trend for the percentage of Latino families that share meals, from 66 percent in 2003, to 58 percent in 2007. The 2010 data in the current Illinois sample continue in that direction.

Number of Days per Week with a Family Meal, Among 32 Latino Families



- Latino children are drinking roughly three fourths of a soda (73%) per day on average.** Past research has noted that for each serving of a sugar-sweetened drink consumed per day, 11-year-olds were 60 percent more likely to become overweight over the course of a year.⁶ Family-based efforts to reduce soda consumption could help reduce weight gain.
- Fruit and vegetable consumption is well below the daily recommended values.** The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends a minimum of 4.5 servings of

⁵ *Family meals*. Washington: Child Trends, 2007. www.childtrendsdatabank.org (Accessed January 2011).

⁶ Ludwig DS, Peterson KE and Gortmaker SL. "Relation between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: a prospective, observational analysis." *Lancet*, 357:505–508, 2001.

vegetables and 2.5 servings of fruit per day, but the children in our study only consumed 0.56 servings and 1.53 servings on average, respectively. This represents an opportunity to increase Latino families' fruit, and especially vegetable, consumption.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Abriendo Caminos' preliminary findings suggest that communities could be doing more to help prevent obesity among Latino families.

We found that the Latino families who participated in Abriendo Caminos shared meals less frequently than was average for Latino families or families in other racial and ethnic groups. During the weekly workshops, family members enjoyed planning ways to improve their meal-time quality by increasing positive conversation and storytelling and reducing TV viewing. Policymakers can help protect family time for shared meals. We are preparing to deliver our preliminary results to school districts, recommending that extra-curricular activities be scheduled so that shared mealtimes are not consistently thwarted.

We also found that families often expressed shock after an Abriendo Caminos demonstration of the sugar equivalent in a single serving of soda. Additionally, parents reported a lack of control over their children's sweetened beverage consumption at school. While families recognized the need to control sweetened beverage consumption at home, policymakers should be aware that families want their children to have less access to soda outside the home.

While their baseline consumption of fruits and vegetables are low, Abriendo Caminos participants indicated that they do want to eat healthy foods. In their workshop feedback, Latinos repeatedly said their local grocery stores lack affordable, familiar fresh vegetables. Policymakers, planners and retailers should consider how to provide access to healthy foods in food deserts, bearing in mind that they exist even in the agriculturally-rich Midwest. Families also need support in learning to select and cook familiar and unfamiliar foods in culturally acceptable ways. Some of the most popular Abriendo Caminos workshops included taste-testing lower-fat versions of traditional favorite foods and exploring recipes for healthy dishes.

This project will inform practice and policy regarding the support and implementation of effective Latino family wellness programs in community settings. For example, we are developing guidelines for leaders at other sites and recommendations for policymakers in rural Illinois communities with growing Spanish-speaking populations. We also are working with a local grassroots community organization, C-U Fit Families, and the local food co-op, Common Ground, to help organize community-based outreach to Spanish-speaking families.