

Salud America!

The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

Volume 3, Issue 1, Summer, 2010

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UTSA/UTHSCSA program and Cookie Monster bring healthy habits to Latino kids



As part of *Juntos y Saludables* (Get Healthy Together), Cookie Monster and UTSA graduate students dressed as fruit talk about healthy eating and exercise May 18 at the Burleson Early Childhood Center and Stafford Early Childhood Education Center in San Antonio.

At ages 3-5, kids learn the ABCs, counting and more. But how many preschoolers are taught the building blocks of eating well and regular exercise?

Juntos y Saludables (Get Healthy Together) is a two-year obesity and diabetes prevention project in three San Antonio preschools that teach primarily Mexican-American children. Get Healthy Together is offered by the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio and UT San Antonio (UTSA) through their joint San Antonio Life Sciences Institute, which received \$8 million from the state to fund this and other projects.

Get Healthy Together is testing whether it can teach students lifelong healthy behaviors via positive interactions with parents, teachers and school workers.

"We believe this project will help preschool children build healthy

habits that will last into grade school, adolescence and adulthood, as well as increase parents' awareness of good nutrition and physical activity for themselves and their kids," said Dr. Amelie G. Ramirez, director of the IHPR and co-principal investigator of the project with Dr. Zenong Yin of UTSA.

As director of *Salud America!*, Dr. Ramirez has helped Get Healthy Together use a bilingual curriculum for children 3-5. The curriculum was developed by The Children's Workshop and features Sesame Street characters, songs and dances.

On May 18, 2010, Sesame Street's Cookie Monster visited children and parents from the Burleson Early Childhood Education Center and Stafford Early Childhood Education Center to help them celebrate having completed one school year of the curriculum. The two centers hosted

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Salud America! The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program aims to unite and increase the number of Latino scientists engaged in research on childhood obesity among Latinos to seek environmental and policy solutions to the epidemic. The network is directed by the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio. For more information, visit www.salud-america.org. The *Salud America!* E-newsletter is distributed quarterly to its national membership network.



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Director's Corner

Letter to members from Dr. Amelie Ramirez

This spring, the City of San Antonio received a \$15.6 million federal grant to fight childhood obesity. Mayor Julián Castro created the Mayor's Fitness Council, which will develop ways to spur improved community nutrition and activity, as one part of the city's plan. I was honored to be named co-chair of the council.

The council, which met for the first time in late May, also is co-chaired by Wane McGarity, a former Dallas Cowboy, and Tony Carty of Labatt Food Service and the YMCA of Greater San Antonio.

The council will develop and implement initiatives in five main areas: media and community outreach/education; corporate and organizational wellness; healthy schools; nutrition and fresh food; and fitness, recreation and active transportation.

According to city documents, the council is planning a wide range of initiatives, including: a media campaign,



Amelie Ramirez

Web site, "train the trainer" institute for P.E. teachers, other training programs, a Mayor's Fitness Challenge for the public and students starting in August, an initiative to bring healthier options to school cafeterias and vending machines, community garden and farmer's market initiatives, bringing healthier food retailers to underserved areas, incentivizing adoption of healthier restaurant menus, fitness summit, and street, parks and built environment improvements.

As a co-chair, I'm really looking forward to seeing the kind of changes this council can make to help reverse the obesity epidemic, especially among our children and underserved populations.

Read more about the Mayor's Fitness Council and its members [here](#). As always, please be sure to frequently check our [Web site](#) for updates on our and [others'](#) efforts to address Latino childhood obesity.

Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H.

Director, *Salud America!*

Director, Institute for Health Promotion Research
University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio



News Briefs

Salud America! Latino child obesity video gets awards, YouTube views

The *Salud America!* "Did You Know?/¿Sabía Usted?" video, which uses shocking statistics and child voices to document the complex Latino childhood obesity epidemic and motivate people to do something about it, is earning rave reviews from the film industry. The video won awards at the 2010 New York Festivals International Television & Film Awards, 2010 Aegis Video & Film Production Awards and the 31st Annual Telly Awards. The video also has generated more than 4,800 views on [YouTube](#).



Salud America! membership number rises

The number of *Salud America!* members has reached 1,630 as of July 2010, up from about 1,300 a year ago. We urge you to invite colleagues to join, as well as others interested in addressing the problem of obesity among Latino children. Join [here](#).



Blog on Latino health, childhood obesity

The team behind *Salud America!* runs a [blog](#), called *SaludToday*, focusing on Latino child and adult health, including obesity and cancer.

Funding Opportunities

Grant Roundup

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) compiles a wide variety of obesity-related research funding [opportunities](#). The National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR), which aims to improve childhood obesity research and reverse childhood obesity, also offers a [grant listing](#), as does the U.S. Office of [Minority Health](#).

Healthy Eating Research Grants

Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), is seeking rapid response [grant proposals](#) to promote healthy eating among children to prevent childhood obesity. Applications are due September 1, 2010.

Active Living Research Grants

Active Living Research, another RWJF national program, is seeking [proposals](#) for studies of emerging or anticipated changes in physical activity-related policies or environments. Grants are awarded on a rolling basis. Letters of intent may be submitted until July 1, 2011.

Stepping Up Against Latino Childhood Obesity

More programs get kids to 'run' from obesity

Angie Cano recently jogged around a track in San Benito with her daughters—Mayra, a 5th-grader, and Anna Lea, a kindergartner—and many other **Marathon Kids** participants from the Rio Grande Valley, a largely Latino region in South Texas.

The Cano family has learned a lot from Marathon Kids, an evidence-based running program for kids that also teaches nutrition, gardening and healthy lifestyles.

"It's healthy, but this is also a great way that we spend family time," Cano told the *Brownsville Herald*.

"It gets easier all the time" to run and eat healthy, Mayra added.

As U.S. childhood obesity continues to rise, especially among Latinos and other minorities, programs like Marathon Kids are getting on track—literally—across the nation to build kids' fitness and healthy eating skills.

In Arizona, a Phoenix Children's Hospital program, **Kid's Rock Stars**

has 2,800 kids log their walking and running throughout the year and join their parents in walking groups.

The hospital also teaches parents to help their families lead healthier lives.

In Minnesota, the new **TC Kids Marathon** offers tools for teachers, coaches and parents to create 12-, eight- or four-week training programs with short-distance running and other activities for kids in grades K-6.

Back in Texas, Marathon Kids is embarking on its 15th year. Since it began in Texas, the program has expanded to Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles and other areas. Children who participate complete a full marathon in short increments over a few months, and complement



the activity with nutrition education and schoolyard gardening.

A recent **study** found that students enrolled in Marathon Kids at low-income schools participated more in running during the school year than non-Marathon Kids students, according to researchers at the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Advancement of Healthy Living.

Program satisfaction was universal, but the highest satisfaction levels were reported by Latino (74.9%) and black (64.3%) kids.

"Data from the Houston- and Austin-area Marathon Kids show us that low-cost, community-school approaches for promoting physical activity and healthy eating during school and at home can be successful," said Dr. Andrew Springer, study leader.

Salud America! NAC

Elva Arredondo

Marice Ashe

► Laura Brennan

Nancy Butte

Anna Diez-Roux

Robert Garcia

Lawrence Green

Robin Hamre

Terry Huang

Barbara Israel

Laura Kettel Khan

Judith Ottoson

Frank Penedo

Charlotte Pratt

Maya Rockeymoore

James Sallis

Randy Schwartz

Mary Story

Elsie Taveras

Mildred Thompson

Amy Lazarus Yaroch

Meet the National Advisory Committee (NAC)

Dr. Laura Brennan has a passion for working with community leaders, researchers and other key players to make the connections that improve community health.

For example, she spent three years traveling to and evaluating how dozens of communities changed their policies and environments to increase opportunities for active living with partial funding from *Active Living by Design*, an RWJF national **program**.

Dr. Brennan talked with city planners, community leaders and residents. She planted trees and ran on trails. She saw challenges like limited access to services.

"It has been the most amazing

experience a person could hope to have in a lifetime," said Brennan, who supported development of a best practices **supplement** of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in 2009. "Efforts like these are much-needed to change systems, policies and environments across communities to improve health equity and reverse child obesity."



Laura Brennan

Brennan is founder, president and CEO of Transtria, a public health research and consulting company in St. Louis, Mo., and assistant professor of behavioral science and health education at Saint Louis University School of Public Health.

She has led many local, state and national projects to facilitate discussions among practitioners, researchers, community members and advocacy groups to help them plan ways to address social, economic and environmental influences on health.

Brennan now is evaluating how *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*, another RWJF national **program**, helps communities reshape their environments for healthy living.

"Changing a community takes a willingness from all involved to understand the current environment (access to care, healthy foods, etc.) and influential social determinants (livable wages, education, etc.)," she said. "Then you can start to impact health inequities and community health."

Grantee Corner

Meet Salud America! Grantee Javier Rosado

Javier Rosado knew he wanted to help people.

He just didn't know how to match that interest to a field of study.

The University of South Florida undergrad sought help at the school's Career Center. There and with help from his scholarship mentors, he explored his values, interests and skills, got interested in behavioral health, got a degree in interdisciplinary social sciences and earned a doctorate in counseling psychology at Florida State University.

When he started work at a rural pediatric clinic and observed shockingly high obesity rates among Latino kids, he knew he'd found the right way to help.

"I quickly noticed there were significant barriers to addressing the problem. Latino parents had their children's best interests at heart but lacked information and resources," said Rosado, who now coordinates



Javier Rosado

clinical behavioral health services at that clinic in Immokalee, Fla., which serves primarily Latino migrant workers. "I knew it was my responsibility to contribute to coming up with solutions for this problem."

Rosado is one of 20 pilot researchers funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

With his work based in Immokalee and Quincy, Fla., Rosado is looking at ways rural clinics and



A research assistant speaks with a mother and her son during a well-child appointment in Florida as part of Dr. Javier Rosado's *Salud America!* pilot research project.

school health programs inform Latino parents about their children's weight.

"The long-term goal is to change the policies of these clinics," he said. "We think BMI (body mass index) will be the most helpful tool to explain children's weight to families. We're hoping to show the clinics how they can use BMI information to improve their patients' care."

Following children's routine medical checkups, parents will be asked about:

- Ideal body size and male/female weight differences;

- The way the clinic or schools deliver weight-related information;
- Whether the parents fully understand their child's health situation; and
- What parents think they need to combat obesity-related issues

In addition to the interviews in Immokalee, Rosado's study will gather information from parents of Latino children in Quincy, where a separate obesity study is under way.

After those children receive BMI screenings at school, their parents receive a letter explaining the results. Rosado and his colleagues will interview those parents on the letter's content and learn what change, if any, they made in response to the letter's BMI report.

"We want to see how parents react to a BMI report and how information could be most effectively presented," he said. "The results could help other communities do the same."

Watch Dr. Rosado Talk About His Project



Grantee Corner

Meet Salud America! Grantee Dharma Cortes

When it comes to Latinos' health struggles, Dharma Cortes has seen it all.

The paradox of poverty and obesity. The struggle to manage chronic diseases. The lack of appropriate nutrition information.



Dharma Cortes

In response, Cortes' new *Salud America!* pilot research project, *Esto Es Mejor*, is teaching low-income Spanish-speaking families in Lynn, Mass., how to shop and eat healthy food despite financial and environmental constraints.

"I want to be able to help Latino parents and grandparents figure out the best and most efficient way to eat healthy food even when they face challenges finding healthy food in the

neighborhoods where they live," said Cortes, PhD, a senior research associate at the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Cortes is one of 20 pilot researchers funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

Cortes' project is examining current food-purchasing patterns and food nutritional values of 20 low-income, Spanish-speaking Latino families. She also will map convenience stores, grocery stores and restaurants that offer healthy food options in Lynn.

Researchers will examine if efforts to improve nutrition education among people with low literacy rates could influence families' consumer behaviors by increasing their food literacy. To develop a descriptive narrative of potential communication strategies, data are being collected from the families using semi-structured interviews, cognitive interviews and Photovoice—a technique in which participants take photos of environments to



For Dr. Cortes' *Salud America!* project, low-income Latinos took photos of their home food environments, like the ones above.



help tell the story of a health issue.

The program will develop social marketing messages and other communications to promote healthy food purchasing and consumption practices among Latinos.

Messages will be spread via local government-sponsored programs and obesity-related initiatives, as well as a local community health center.

"We want to find out what changes are observed in participants' grocery receipts before and after nutritional education, and what are the 'before and after' changes in their food preparation and eating patterns," Cortes said.

The answers could impact health policies for Latinos across Massachusetts.

"We are going to inform local and state policymakers about how to maximize social marketing and communication outlets to deliver healthy eating messages at the micro- and macro-level food environments of low-income Latinos," Cortes said.

View a Slideshow of Dr. Cortes' Project

Esto es mejor: Improving food purchasing selection among low-income Spanish-speaking Latinos through social marketing messages

Dharma E. Cortés, Ph.D.
Senior Research Associate
Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino
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Boston

Research

7% of middle-schoolers are severely obese

Just after a large national [study](#) showed that healthier food and more exercise in middle school can lower obesity rates among overweight kids, a second paper from the same study warned that many of them are severely obese, the *San Antonio Express-News* [reports](#).

The HEALTHY study, which followed 4,600 students through three years of middle school, found that 7 percent of sixth-graders overall and 10 percent from San Antonio were severely obese—in the 99th percentile for their age and gender.

These children are at higher risk of developing diabetes and other medical problems.

"It's not surprising to find this group of kids at extreme risk of diabetes," Zenong Yin, professor of kinesiology at the University of Texas at San Antonio and co-author of the latest paper in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, told the *Express-News*.

While the study indicated that 7 percent of the students at all of the 42 mostly urban middle schools from across the nation were severely obese, the highest rates were among African-American girls at 9 percent and Hispanic boys at 8 percent.

South Texas, which has a predominantly Latino population, has a substantially higher rate of obese and severely obese children, local health officials said.

Dangerously obese kids

The HEALTHY study, which included 4,600 middle school students in San Antonio and six other cities, found 7 percent of sixth-graders were severely obese—those whose height and weight puts them in the 99th percentile among their peers. Hispanic boys and African American girls were most likely to fall into that category.

	Hispanic		African American		Anglo	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Normal weight	43%	52%	55%	50%	53%	60%
Overweight	19%	21%	17%	19%	19%	21%
Obese	30%	21%	21%	22%	22%	15%
Severely obese	8%	6%	7%	9%	6%	4%

Source: *HEALTHY study, Journal of Adolescent Health*

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

Dr. Roberto Treviño, who led the local arm of the HEALTHY study, told the *Express-News* that the main findings of the study showed that aggressive action in middle school can improve the health of those children at highest risk.

"More than 92 percent of our students are considered economically disadvantaged," Robert Durón, superintendent of the San Antonio Independent School District, which had six middle schools involved in the study, told the *Express-News*. "These are the populations that are more at health risk than any other population. But economics should not and cannot be the determining factor when it comes to our children's health and success in life."



Research Briefs

Parents oblivious to obese kids

As childhood obesity continues to rise because of factors like high-calorie foods, a lack of exercise and junk food ads on TV, a new culprit is arising—parental perceptions of their children's weight, according to a *Newsweek* [article](#). The article cites a poll that most Americans believe childhood obesity is a significant challenge, yet 84 percent say their children are at a healthy weight. The article also cites a study of a low-income Latino population in which mothers preferred a plumper figure for their children than themselves. Dr. Elsie Taveras, a member of the *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, found that babies who gain weight rapidly in the first six months of life are at a higher risk for obesity at age 3. "A lot of families think that weight gain early on is just baby fat and it's going to go away," Taveras told *Newsweek*. When a baby who gains excessively turns into an obese toddler, he may be on track to become an obese adult, too. Unfortunately, pediatricians often sidestep the issue in the very young, says Taveras. "We don't want to label children too early or we don't know what to do."

San Antonio project takes next steps to up Girl Scouts' physical activity

Girl Scouts, parents and community members recently gathered in San Antonio to review girls' photos of barriers and enablers to physical activity (at right), and discuss ways to inspire adolescent girls to be more physically active. The event was part of a project by the team behind *Salud America!* to boost the girls' health now and throughout their lives. The project features input from girls ages 11-14 from the San Antonio and Edgewood independent school districts, their parents, community leaders, Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas and the Edgewood Family Network. Researchers Dr. Deborah Parra-Medina and Laura Esparza from the Institute for Health Promotion Research at the UT Health Science Center at San Antonio plan to use the girls' photos and other information from the community to devise new strategies to get girls moving. They also plan to use low-cost mobile and wireless technology, like text-messaging. Read more about it [here](#).



Policy & Built Environment Corner

Report finds school policies, practices lacking in creating healthy environments

A new [report](#) from Bridging the Gap and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) finds that U.S. elementary schools continue to offer junk food and sodas, serve meals that don't meet current dietary guidelines, and provide little time for physical activity, particularly in predominantly Latino and black schools.

In the 2007-08 school year, 62 percent of public elementary school students were able to purchase competitive foods or beverages through school stores, vending machines and less-healthy items like soda, candy, cookies and french fries.

Researchers also found that only one in five third-grade public school students were offered daily physical education in 2007-08.

"The majority of elementary students attended a school where practices were not aligned with national recommendations for diet and physical activity, and there wasn't much improvement over the two-year study period," said lead author Dr. Lindsey Turner of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Bridging the Gap, an RWJF research program. "It was alarming to learn that so many young children had easy access to junk foods and sugary drinks, yet few had adequate time for physical education class and recess."

The new report, *School Policies and Practices to Improve*



Health and Prevent Obesity: National Elementary School Survey Results, examined practices relevant to nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention.

The report details how many schools have not implemented wellness policy provisions required by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004.

The report also highlights opportunities for changing policies and practices to better support healthy eating and physical activity among elementary school students, such as improving the nutritional quality of school meals, limiting unhealthy foods, ensuring access to

high-quality physical activity for at least 150 minutes and more.

"From this report, we can see where we need to work harder to help our nation's youngest students eat well and be active in school," said Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, RWJF president and CEO. "These findings are especially relevant for policy-makers now working to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages available to students, whether in the lunch line, snack bar or classroom."

Policy News Briefs

New national health council reports to Congress

The National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council, created by the Affordable Care Act, submitted its first status report to Congress this week. Chaired by U.S. Surgeon General Regina Benjamin, the Council is charged with elevating and coordinating prevention activities and designing a focused strategy across federal departments to prevent

disease and promote the nation's health. The report is an early step in the Administration's development of the first-ever national prevention and health promotion strategy. The strategy's impact will be significant because it will take a community health approach to prevention and well-being—identifying and prioritizing actions across government and between the public and private sectors. Read the report [here](#) or read about the national

strategy [here](#).

RWJF Center highlights federal policy issues

The RWJF Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity sends weekly email updates on policy and federal agency news. To learn more about the Center, visit its [Web site](#). Click on "Stay Informed" to sign up for the email updates. The Center also aims to keep people up to date on new legislation [here](#).

Cookie Monster

► Continued from page 1

all project interventions, including activity cards with tips on outdoor play and nutrition, parent education seminars on obesity, teacher and staff training.

Cookie Monster, a known cookie-gobbler who now touts cookies as a “sometimes” snack, got a warm reception from the students.

Kids danced to music and named fruits such as strawberries as some of their favorite “anytime” foods.

Rachel Mata, parent of a 4-year-old at Stafford, said the program helped her overcome fears of serving new foods to her son because he might not eat them.

“Now he knows about lots of different foods [through the program]. He likes blueberries, pineapple, strawberries, where before we’d stick to just apples and bananas,” Mata said.

School leaders also lauded the program.

“We have a lot of first-year teachers, so it was great to



Salud America! leaders Kip Gallion (left) and Amelie Ramirez (right) pose with Cookie Monster.

give them suggestions on fun dances and activities to get the kids more active,” said Erin Keyser, instructional facilitator at Stafford. “It pays off in the classroom. The students benefit from activity and knowledge of exercise and healthy foods.”

Children and parents from the Cardenas Early Childhood Education Center got a visit from Cookie, too. Cardenas was the control school in which, to allow the research team to compare outcomes, a learning curriculum without health messages was taught.

Get Healthy Today was created because an estimated 25 percent of preschool children are overweight, which can spur health problems.

“Latino kids have higher obesity risk because they’re more likely to live in families of low socioeconomic status and in neighborhoods where outdoor physical activity is restricted by climate, safety or lack of facilities,” Dr. Ramirez said. “That’s why Get Healthy Together is so important.”

Watch some [TV news reports](#) about Cookie’s visit.

About the E-newsletter

This E-newsletter is produced quarterly by *Salud America!* Please send news items or story ideas to despres@uthscsa.edu.

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Salud America! The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

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Kids' Health Q&A

Question: How do you get a picky eater to eat healthy foods?

To deal with a picky eater, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation suggests these tips:

- Get them excited about healthy food: Let them smell, touch, taste, ask questions and try fruits, veggies, yogurts and other healthy foods in the kitchen.
- Get them involved in the kitchen: Let them help you with small, kid-safe jobs in the kitchen such as mixing ingredients. Be sure to thank them for their help.
- Give them a say in what they eat: Help your kids make the right food and drink choices from an early age. If they have a say in decisions they will be more excited about what they eat.
- Take them grocery shopping: Get your kids involved in shopping decisions. It may take a little more time in the supermarket but it is likely to lead to less tantrums at meals.
- Keep the junk food out of the house: Your kids can't eat unhealthy snacks if you don't buy them. Kids will moan at first but soon they will get hungry and reach for the apple instead of the chips.
- Add healthy food when you can: Find ways to add healthy foods into foods your child already likes. You can put blueberries in pancakes, chopped fruit on cereal, or small pieces of broccoli in macaroni and cheese.
- Help them learn: Encourage your kids to draw pictures of healthy foods or write a poem. Post on the fridge and make sure they know you are proud.

