



UC Davis Human Lactation Center

# Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Forum: Survey Summary

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Version 2.0  
February 2, 2006

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# Introduction

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On February 7, 2006, the California WIC Association will convene the Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Forum to initiate a dialogue among advocates and experts interested in collaborative efforts to prevent overweight among our youngest, most vulnerable children. In late January, invitees were asked to fill out a short survey to identify key environmental issues that contribute to early childhood overweight and subsequent obesity. These issues will serve as the focus of the afternoon discussion. Invitees were also asked to describe opportunities (circumstances that favor action at this time) and potential barriers to addressing the issues. Many respondents offered suggestions for initial strategies. The purpose of this document is to summarize the results of the survey.

The key issues selected by the survey respondents (in order of popularity) are: 1) direct marketing of food products to children; 2) limited opportunities for physical activity; 3) lack of access to healthier food choices; and 4) lack of access to health care services. Opportunities, barriers, and strategies have been compiled from the surveys for each of the key issues.

## Key Issues

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### Direct Marketing of Food Products to Children

#### Description

*Concerns were raised by nearly every respondent about marketing of food products directly to children. Given that half of preschoolers watch more than 2 hours of television per day, it is not surprising that money is heavily invested in media advertising directed to young children. During Saturday morning children's programming, 57% of all ads are food advertisements. More than half of these commercials promote sweets, snacks, and fast foods. These investments are well spent; researchers have shown that exposure to marketing is associated with increased intake of sweets and snack foods among children.*

#### Opportunities for Action

- Growing public concern about obesity and diabetes among children
- Increased public awareness of association between fast foods and overweight
- Research associating advertising with young children's behavior
- Pediatric recommendations to limit children's TV viewing
- Policy makers tend to be supportive of efforts targeted to the protection of children (the focus on the very young may increase interest and support)

#### Barriers

- Food industry resources and investment (money, influence, lobbying power)
- Formula industry resources
- Lack of funding and methods for promotion of healthy foods and lifestyles to very young children
- Pervasive TV viewing by very young children
- Lack of buy-in from decision makers who may believe young children are unaffected by advertising

## Suggested Strategies

- Use television and other media to market healthy foods and lifestyles to parents of young children
- Provide education to parents and young children about nutrition, health and media literacy
- Increase public awareness of marketing influence on young children
- Federal regulations limiting direct marketing to young children
- Warning labels on unhealthy foods (particularly those packaged for young children) to warn consumers of risks
- Increase culturally sensitive, age-specific, appropriate media messages

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## Limited Opportunities for Physical Activity

### Description

*Many respondents expressed concerns about limited opportunities for low-income children to participate in safe and appropriate physical activities. In many neighborhoods, there are few safe areas for children to play. Toddlers and preschoolers have specialized needs (e.g., enclosed areas with age-appropriate play structures) that must be addressed. Childcare educators often have little education on age-appropriate physical activity. Because of the focus on physical activity among school-aged children, relatively little is known about physical activity patterns and related health consequences among preschool children.*

### Opportunities for Action

- Public and legislators concerned about the obesity epidemic
- The governor and his wife support and promote healthy eating and physical activity, though much of the focus has been on older children and adults
- Groups with funding are actively promoting healthy lifestyles for children but needs of younger children are not addressed
- Public is aware of the link between sedentary behavior and overweight, though younger children are not often identified as “overweight” by parents
- Initiative efforts continue for universal preschool program – physical activity guidelines may be integrated into policies and curricula

### Barriers

- Lack of safe, age-appropriate play areas for young children
- Poor urban planning (inequity of land use; little opportunity for walking)
- Lack of funding to improve community play areas and to purchase age-appropriate equipment
- Lack of education about the importance of exercise for young children
- Hectic family schedules limit time for children’s unstructured play, particularly for preschoolers who require constant supervision
- Efforts are currently aimed at older, school-aged children
- Limited research directly linking inactivity with overweight in young children
- Sedentary, quiet children are considered “easier” by parents (lack of education efforts to encourage more realistic expectations)
- Competing priorities
- Multigenerational cultural norms for sedentary activities

## Suggested Strategies

- Funding and zoning for safe, age-appropriate play areas for young children
- Promote access to free, inexpensive family-oriented physical activities
- City planning for increased “walkable” communities
- Collaborate with governors’ office to promote physical activity among young children
- Provide teachers in childcare and preschool settings with curriculum materials addressing overweight and inactivity
- Require or provide incentives for physical activity-related education for licensing of childcare facilities
- Include physical activity information in parent education from health care providers

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## Lack of Access to Healthier Food Choices

### Description

*Respondents reported that access for low-income families to healthier food choices such as fresh fruits and vegetables can be severely affected by high costs and limited availability. Small neighborhood stores, typically found in low-income areas, have been shown to charge up to 76% more than large supermarkets. In addition to these higher costs, small stores typically carry very few options for parents interested in healthier foods. Because of their special needs, very young children are particularly vulnerable to nutrient deficiencies. Respondents also expressed concern that childcare educators often have little education and guidance as to which foods are most appropriate for young children.*

### Opportunities for Action

- Limited availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income neighborhoods has been well documented
- IOM report was released recommended changes to the WIC food packages
- WIC Farmer’s Market programs have been highly successful throughout the state
- Policy Link’s *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Improving Access and Opportunities through Food Retailing* describes ways in which low-income communities are improving access to healthy, affordable foods
- Existing law to accommodate breastfeeding women in the workplace
- In 2005, the California Breastfeeding Coalition and the Task Force for Youth and Workplace Wellness organized a successful campaign to recognize employers who accommodate breastfeeding women

### Barriers

- Poverty and food insecurity among families with young children
- Powerful food industry marketing and lobbying to limit restrictions (but cultural shifts are possible; these shifts can drive change)
- Concerns about infringing on parental responsibilities and choices
- Limited availability of affordable healthier food choices in low-income neighborhoods
- Limited funding for innovations in food assistance programs
- Limited time for home preparation and sharing of meals

- Convenience and pricing in fast food restaurants
- Lack of education for childcare educators about healthy foods for young children
- Finding ways to educate parents about healthy food choices and the ramifications of early feeding practices
- Increased need for licensed childcare providers preclude requirements that seem onerous for licensure (i.e., increased education needs)
- Childcare educators (and others) may not model appropriate food choices
- Corn subsidies reducing the price of corn syrup
- Limited information about effective interventions
- Lack of accommodation for breastfeeding mothers in day care settings
- Lack of workplace accommodation for breastfeeding women in low-wage positions

### Suggested Strategies

- Support IOM recommendations for WIC food package changes
- Streamline enrollment of WIC households into the Food Stamp Program
- Revamp food assistance programs to promote healthy lifestyles
- Expand the WIC Farmer’s Market Program
- Regulate foods that may be offered to young children in licensed childcare facilities and at Head Start
- Require education about healthy food choices as part of licensure of childcare educators
- Subsidies to fruit/vegetable farmers to reduce the cost of these foods
- Include nutrition guidelines in universal preschool programs
- Provide teachers in state-contracted preschools with curriculum materials and recipes to promote healthy food choices
- Restrict locations of fast food restaurants
- Restrict unhealthy foods and beverages in public places that young children frequent (parks, recreation facilities, etc.)
- Ensure that drinking water is available in public parks and recreation facilities
- Conduct environmental assessments to identify the availability of healthy foods and/or prevalence of fast food establishments and liquor stores
- Taxes on “junk foods”

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## Lack of Access to Health Care Services

### Description

*Interactions between parents and health care providers offer important opportunities to increase parents’ awareness and knowledge about the prevention of overweight in young children. These opportunities begin even before a child is born, with prenatal education about breastfeeding, and continue throughout the preschool years. Unfortunately, not all families have access to culturally and linguistically appropriate health care. Respondents expressed specific concerns about the lack of access to health care services in two key areas: 1) breastfeeding education and support; and 2) preventative assessment, education, and follow-up services.*

### Opportunities for Action

- Major medical professional organizations have issued formal statements on the prevention of childhood overweight
- Increased awareness among policy makers of the importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate care
- Research studies support breastfeeding and appropriate infant feeding as protective against childhood overweight and subsequent obesity
- Breastfeeding advocates are well organized – projects in process
- Research evidence indicates that hospital policies are associated with breastfeeding rates

### Barriers

- Lack of reimbursement for preventative services (including assessment and follow-up)
- Lack of reimbursement for lactation-related supplies and services
- Limited availability of Medi-Cal providers
- Limited access to quality pediatric care for low-income children
- Lack of culturally and linguistically effective interventions
- Insurance companies do not recognize the importance of prevention
- Multiple recommendations and guidelines may cause confusion for parents
- Lack of coordination of health care systems
- Difficult to change bureaucracies

### Suggested Strategies

- Promote Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative and model hospital policies
- Media event surrounding breastfeeding rates and hospital policies
- Promote healthy lifestyles during prenatal and well-child health care contacts
- Establish universal health care coverage
- Require breastfeeding education as part of nursing curriculum and in OB office trainings
- Provide reimbursement for health care providers' preventative services
- Include screening and assessment for overweight during well-child visits

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## Summary

The results of the survey reflect nearly universal agreement on the key environmental issues that contribute to overweight among infants and preschool children. These issues (direct marketing to children, lack of opportunities for physical activity, lack of access to healthier food choices, and lack of access to preventative health care services) will serve as the focus of our discussions at the Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Forum. While other groups are addressing some or all of these issues, the special needs of infants and preschoolers typically are not considered. Keeping these needs in mind, participants will be asked to develop collaborative plans to promote environmental change and begin the fight against overweight much earlier than in current efforts, long before our children enter school.