

Preschoolers Learn How Nutrition and Physical Activity Can Be Healthy Fun

Maggie Hall

Summary

The Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County (DOH-Pinellas) funded a resource specialist with its Partnerships to Improve Community Health (PICH) to assist child-care centers in implementing the physical activity and healthy nutrition guidelines in former First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" campaign. Center staff received training and support to make the changes while noticing positive results in the preschoolers who learned to associate physical activity with fun and healthier food choices with rewards.

Challenge

From 2012 to 2014, obesity in middle-school students in Pinellas County (FL) increased from 8.1 percent to 10.3 percent. (Source: Florida Tobacco Youth Survey 2014) To reduce the rates in the next generation, DOH-Pinellas' PICH grant funded a part-time specialist to work with child-care centers that committed to offering healthier food choices and more physical activity to their programs. The specialist provided training to center operators using the guidelines in former First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" initiative and guided the introduction of healthier practices for preschoolers at the child-care centers. Those that completed the training and implemented the changes were named "Let's Move!" centers that could market their healthy options to clients and prospective clients.

Solution

As of August 2017, the PICH-funded specialist had trained 58 centers in "Let's Move!" initiatives. Centers who complete the training will receive window clings that allow them to tell visitors that they have taken extra steps to safeguard the health of the children they're trusted to care for by families. Changes have included more physical activity periods and encouraging preschoolers to drink water instead of sugary drinks. One center started offering stickers to children whose lunchboxes from home included more fruits and vegetables. The children posted their stickers on a board and watched them add up. The preschoolers themselves began asking parents to pack healthier lunches. Another center adopted new policies that included "healthy birthday treats only."



Your Involvement Is Key
Parents can help child-care centers by choosing "Let's Move!" centers to care for their preschoolers in Pinellas County. Families should ask all prospective centers about their physical activity and nutrition guidelines before they commit to having them care for their preschoolers. Centers trained by the PICH specialist can continue to support the guidelines as a way to show families that their children will be exposed to good health habits there.

Results

The PICH-funded resource specialist has completed 30 trainings for almost 300 child-care workers. The centers have reported positive changes in the children who are associating good health with fun. One center reported an increase in fruits and vegetables in children who had not previously come to the center with these items in their lunchboxes. The "Let's Move!" initiative gave the child-care centers the chance to discuss physical activity and healthy foods with the children and their parents. The resource specialist approached some of the centers, but some asked for the training after hearing about it from others via word of mouth. Staff reported seeing children excited about being rewarded for choosing healthy foods.

Contact

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"Our parents provide very healthy lunches, but we did see an increase in these items among the children who had not been big fruit or veggie eaters. It also gave us lots of opportunities to talk about what constitutes a vegetable or a fruit."

- Child-care center staff

Sustaining Success

PICH's goal is to have the existing "Let's Move!" centers maintain their healthier practices after the grant period ends. The resource specialist continues to assist centers using a grant through Pinellas Extension. The addition of window clings that centers receive to announce their "Let's Move!" participation can let prospective clients know that the staff has gone the extra mile to ensure a healthy day for their children. Centers can continue using their completion of the program as a positive marketing tool beyond the life of the PICH grant, which is a plus for them.

