

## Novel Interventions to Prevent Early Childhood Obesity: Conference Summary

Conference Steering Committee Mary Ann Chiasson, DrPH and Terry Rosenberg, PhD, Public Health Solutions, and Arthur Fierman, MD, NYU School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital Center Department of Pediatrics

**O**n March 17, 2009, nearly 200 pediatricians, nutritionists, other providers, policy makers and funders attended the conference. Childhood obesity has become one of the defining public health challenges of our time and the severity of the epidemic is underscored by the ever younger ages at which obesity is touching the lives of children. While most obesity prevention programs have focused on school-age children, evidence is mounting that programs must target children well before age five. This conference provided an opportunity for attendees to learn about findings from new obesity prevention programs and interventions that begin in infancy or early childhood, ranging from simple video-based interventions to multi-session intensive family counseling programs. The following is a synopsis of each of the presentations.

### Keynote Address

**Richard Daines, MD, New York State Commissioner of Health**

#### *“Obesity in New York State’s Youngest Children”*

Dr. Daines detailed the extent of the problem and Governor Patterson’s multipronged proposal to address obesity in New York State. New York is in the forefront in the fight against childhood obesity and was the first state in the nation to implement a revised Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food package. The package offers mothers and children a more balanced set of foods that reflect dietary recommendations to consume less fat and sweetened beverages and to eat more fiber and fruits and vegetables. Commissioner Daines also announced that Dr. Sally Findlay from Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, Dr. Mary Ann Chiasson from Public Health Solutions, and Dr. Jackson Sekhobo, New York State Department of Health have received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the New York State Health Foundation for a four-year evaluation of the impact of New York State’s obesity prevention innovations on children and their families. A video of Dr. Daines talking about obesity can be viewed on YouTube™ (SODA vs MILK).

### Presentations

**Cathy Nonas, MS, RD, CDE, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

#### *“Daycare: A New Model for Increasing Activity and Improving Nutrition”*

A recent amendment to the New York City health code specifies the amount and availability of beverages, limits TV and video viewing, and requires physical activity for children in daycare. Daycare center teachers have been provided with nutritional and physical activity education to help them meet the new City-mandated policies. An ongoing study will evaluate how the policies are being carried out.

**Alan Mendelsohn, MD, NYU School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital Center Department of Pediatrics**

#### *“Prevention of Childhood Obesity Through Low Intensity Pediatric Primary Care Programs Designed to Enhance Parent-Child Interaction”*

The BELLE Project (Bellevue Project for Early Language Literacy and Education Success) has as one of its objectives to determine whether pediatric primary care can be leveraged through interventions designed to enhance parenting. This is a randomized-controlled trial of two interventions: the Video Interaction Project (VIP), and Building Blocks (discussed below). As part of VIP, families meet with a child development specialist at each routine pediatric visit from two weeks to three years of age. At these meetings, a videotape is made of a parent and a child engaging in activities of their choice. Then the videotape is watched together with the specialist who reinforces positive parenting; the tape is taken home to share with the rest of the family. Analyses have documented enhanced child development outcomes. At 24 months of age, children in the VIP program were less likely than controls to be obese, even though weight status was not directly addressed in the program. It was hypothesized that increased parental responsiveness to a child’s play/reading was related to increased responsiveness to a child’s feeding.

**Harris Huberman, MD, SUNY Downstate Medical Center**  
**“Can a Low-Intensity Parenting Newsletter Approach Prevent Obesity in Young Children?”**

The second intervention being tested in the BELLE Project is Building Blocks (BB) (Primeros Pasos). This program mails age-paced parenting newsletters, some of which include obesity prevention messages, and Ages and Stages Questionnaires to families linked to a primary care provider. Children in the BB group were significantly less likely to be overweight compared to children in the control group over the first 30 months and showed a trend toward a lower rate of obesity.

**Mary Jo Messito, MD, NYU School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital Center Department of Pediatrics**  
**“Obesity Prevention in Primary Care: Beginning in Infancy”**

This program is targeted to urban families of low socioeconomic status beginning in the newborn period. The program seeks to affect both what children are fed and how children are fed. The components, which are integrated into routine well child visits, include a special curriculum and groups led by nutritionists and child development specialists. The evaluation design compares the intervention cohort to a matched control group. The results to date suggest that the program is having a positive impact on infant feeding practices.

**Terry Rosenberg, PhD, Public Health Solutions**  
**“Testing an Innovative Video Intervention to Prevent Early Childhood Obesity”**

An evaluation of a bilingual, English/Spanish educational video on infant feeding knowledge, attitudes, and practices was conducted in a New York City WIC population. The video, “It’s Never Too Early: Feeding Your Baby Well”/ “Empezando Temprano: La Buena Alimentación de Tu Bebé,” was distributed in DVD format to a group of Intervention mothers and not to a group of Control mothers. Most (85%) of the mothers receiving the DVD watched it. When assessed six months after receiving the video, mothers who received the video showed greater improvement in knowledge about healthy feeding practices than mothers who did not. The Intervention mothers were also more likely to have delayed the introduction of solids than were the Control Group. The DVD is now also available in English/Mandarin and in English/Creole/French at [www.healthsolutions.org](http://www.healthsolutions.org).

**Laurie Miller Brotman, PhD and Spring R. Dawson-McClure, PhD, NYU School of Medicine, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and NYU Child Study Center**  
**“Behavioral Family Intervention with Low-Income Ethnic Minority Preschoolers”**

ParentCorps is a 13-session behavioral family intervention for pre-K students and families designed to promote effective parenting practices and children’s socio-emotional competence. ParentCorps has been shown to enhance the family

environment, normalize children’s stress response and prevent behavior problems. In a prospective long-term follow-up study, early family intervention also led to a dramatic effect on obesity among pre-adolescent girls. This intervention did not include any content related to health or nutrition, and is consistent with an emerging literature that suggests general parenting practices may play a key role in preventing child obesity. Through the Harris Obesity Prevention Effort (HOPE; [www.hopenyu.org](http://www.hopenyu.org)), new components have been added to ParentCorps to more directly address the development of healthy eating habits during the preschool period.

*More information about the conference can be found at [www.healthsolutions.org](http://www.healthsolutions.org).*

*The conference was also sponsored by the Academic Pediatric Association, Region 2 and the American Academy of Pediatrics, District II, Chapters 2 & 3.*

*Funding for the conference was provided by the New York State Assembly and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.*

### About Public Health Solutions

Public Health Solutions develops, implements and advocates dynamic solutions to prevent disease and improve community health. We conduct comprehensive research providing insight on public health issues, create and manage community health programs and provide services to organizations to address public health challenges. Founded in 1957, and formerly known as Medical and Health Research Association of New York City, today Public Health Solutions effectively uses its core competencies in research and evaluation to help illuminate critical public health issues and to design, implement and assess effective methods for preventing disease and improving health in New York City and beyond.

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For more information about *Pulse*:

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