Improving Head Start’s System of Communicating Children’s Weight Status and BMI Scores to Caregivers

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Experimental Biology
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Almost 40% of the 2,500 preschool children enrolled in Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Inc. Head Start programs are overweight or obese.

ABCD Head Start programs provide caregivers with letters reporting their child’s Body Mass Index (BMI) twice per year.

Caregiver responses to BMI letters are typically non-existent or negative. This is distressing to Head Start Nutrition Services staff, as they have resources and supports that they would like families to access to encourage healthier eating and increased physical activity.
• Nutrition Services identified a need to better communicate BMI results/importance of healthy weight to caregivers.

• In spring 2012, a BMI working group consisting of stakeholders from ABCD Head Start programs from across the City of Boston was convened with technical assistance provided by Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures (HKHF).
GOALS OF BMI WORKING GROUP

To convene Head Start staff and work together to:

• Identify challenges in the current system for communicating with caregivers about their children's BMI results

• Develop and implement recommendations to address these challenges
WORKING GROUP ACTIVITIES: SPRING 2012

- Series of structured meetings attended by 18 Head Start staff from 9 different programs (February – April 2012)

- Participants included nutrition services director and staff, Head Start directors, assistant directors, and case managers

- During this process, 5 priority areas were identified and 9 recommendations were developed and presented to wider Head Start community
Priority Areas Identified:

1. Create program wide “buy-in” on the importance of healthy weight
2. Improve communication between key stakeholders (i.e. nutritionists, teachers, case managers, health managers)
3. Provide BMI/nutrition training for Head Start staff
4. Strengthen nutrition training for Head Start caregivers
5. Modify language and format of the letter sent to caregivers informing them of child’s BMI
As compared to baseline ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.40$), participants ($n = 11$) rated the issue of childhood obesity as significantly more important following participation in the working group ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(10) = 2.52$, $p < .05$, $d = .76$.

“I’ve become more aware of what BMI exactly is and its importance in regard to pre-school children.”

“I have a better perspective of how others see the issue of obesity.”
• Comfortable voicing opinions during working group meetings:
  • Always: 64% (n=7)
  • Usually: 18% (n=2)
  • Seldom: 18% (n=2)

• Willingness to participate in another working group:
  • Definitely: 82% (n=9)
  • Moderately Likely: 18% (n=2)

“[I liked] hearing the opinions of different components in Head Start.”

“It is important in any working group to have all components of Head Start represented to be able to get the whole picture.”
WORKING GROUP ACTIVITIES: SUMMER/FALL 2012

- Following the development of recommendations by the initial working group, a follow-up working group comprised of Head Start staff was created to prioritize the recommendations and lay the foundation for implementation (May – July 2012)

- HKHF and ABCD Head Start then collaborated to implement two recommendations and evaluate their impact (Aug – Nov 2012)
Priority Areas Identified:

1. Create program wide “buy-in” on the importance of healthy weight
   → Action Item: Produce a video about the importance of healthy weight for preschoolers and Head Start’s obesity prevention work

3. Provide BMI/nutrition training for Head Start staff
   → Action Item: Develop a healthy weight pre-service training

5. Modify language and format of the letter sent to caregivers informing them of child’s BMI
   → Action Item: Change terminology and add additional information
Healthy Weight Pre-Service

- 90 min Healthy Weight training developed to fit into pre-service trainings offered to all ABCD Head Start staff
- 8 trainings conducted, reaching 153 Head Start staff
- Training focused on importance of healthy weight for preschoolers and included screening of Weight of the Nation documentary
Healthy Weight Pre-Service Evaluation

- Participants rated the importance of overweight/obesity as a “very important” health issue for Head Start children at both pre- and post-training.
- Participants responded at both pre- and post-training that it is “very important” to talk to parents and caregivers about their children’s weight.
- Participants reported slight increases post-training in their comfort level and preparedness to speak with caregivers about their child’s weight.
IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

Modified BMI Letter

• Changed terminology and added additional information, including explanation of BMI and growth chart
• Surveyed staff about letter at pre-service training
• Conducted 4 focus groups about letter with 26 caregivers

Dear Parent:

We’ve measured your child’s height and weight!

Please review the attached Body Mass Index growth chart. It was created using your child’s height and weight measurements, and is an important part of this nutrition assessment. Highlighted, at the bottom of the attached growth chart you will find his/her most recent height and weight, as well as the BMI result and percentile. You can then compare the results of your child’s measurements to the key below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Underweight</th>
<th>Healthy weight</th>
<th>Overweight</th>
<th>Very overweight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underweight; the 5th percentile or below</td>
<td>Healthy weight; 6th percentile up to the 85th percentile</td>
<td>Unhealthy weight, (overweight); 85th to the 94th percentile</td>
<td>Unhealthy weight, (very overweight); the 95th percentile or above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modified BMI Letter

• Results of staff and caregiver feedback:
  • Generally positive
    • Easy to understand, important information, parents would be likely to read and respond to letter
  • Varied levels of comprehension
  • Specific suggestions to be incorporated into next version of letter
    • Definitions of healthy weight, overweight; simpler explanation of BMI
Healthy Weight Video

• Began discussions within Head Start and with community partners to produce a video highlighting:
  • The importance of healthy weight for preschoolers
  • Expert advice from Head Start staff, physicians, etc.
  • What ABCD Head Start is currently doing to promote healthy weight among students and how parents can take advantage of services
The working group helped stakeholders develop a plan to improve the way BMI is understood by staff members and communicated to caregivers.

Overall, working group participants found the process to be beneficial.

Feedback regarding the staff training and changes to the BMI letter has generally been positive.

Information from key stakeholders, including caregivers and Head Start staff, has been critical in creating and implementing feasible and effective changes.

Additional follow up is need to evaluate the long-term effects of the implemented changes on staff and caregiver prioritization of healthy weight among Head Start students.
Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures:
www.neu.edu/healthykids

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