

Mass in Motion: Statewide Policy Initiatives

Kids Eat Better and Move More with Massachusetts Children at Play

It's never too early to start," says Anne Hemmer of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. "Kids learn habits when they're very young. Teaching them to eat better and move more early on helps them live a healthy lifestyle now and later as adults." Unfortunately, unhealthy habits are just as easy for kids to learn and even harder to break as adults. With almost a third of Massachusetts preschoolers either overweight or obese, the state created a program to help child care providers teach our little residents to eat better and move more.

A new regulation requires Massachusetts childcare programs to implement a nutrition program and offer 60 minutes of physical activity each day. In one survey, almost all child care providers responded that they were aware of the regulation, though few have the time or resources to do anything about it on their own. As the project coordinator, Hemmer teamed up with members of the Departments of Early Education and Care and Early and Secondary Education to create Massachusetts Children at Play (MCAP), a

free program to help child care programs meet the requirement.

MCAP recruits and trains mentors to help child care providers incorporate active movement and healthy food options into child care settings. As one mentor put it, "the main barrier at the centers was a lack of knowledge, so as soon as I went in and explained how they could easily make small changes, they were excited to do so."

The emphasis on evaluation is a vital component of MCAP. Hemmer adds, "Halfway through we were able to step back and ask everyone: What's working? What could we do better?" The evaluation helped the workgroup pinpoint several areas in need of tweaking that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Almost all MCAP child care providers and centers are making significant changes in their settings, including:

- » Reaching the 60-minute physical activity requirement.
- » Providing healthy foods and snacks, like fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- » Providing water, low fat or



- skim milk instead of whole milk or sugary drinks.
- » Spending more time being active and less time in front of the TV or computer.

MCAP uses programs that are known to work – and its catching on. In just under one year a total of 103 child care centers were trained in 46 different Massachusetts communities. The team is ready to launch the second half of the program – this time working with over 50 child care centers and 120 family child care providers.

Professionals from all over the country are phoning in for advice on how to form a state-wide program of their own. The use of formative research, evidence-based programs and a true understanding of the preschool environment are the catalysts behind the MCAP program, which is helping to improve the health of thousands of kids across the state.

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