



Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) position statement: SBM supports curbing summertime weight gain among America's youth

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Abstract

The Society of Behavioral Medicine recommends adoption of policies at the district, state, and federal levels that minimize weight gain among youth over the summertime, particularly among low-income, minority school-age youth who appear to be at greater risk. Policies that facilitate (1) partnerships between school districts and community organizations to provide affordable summertime programming, (2) strategic efforts by schools and communities to encourage families to enroll and attend summertime programming via the creation of community-wide summertime offerings offices, (3) adoption of joint-use/shared use agreements in communities to promote use of indoor and outdoor school facilities to provide affordable programming during the summer months, and (4) implementation of strategies that help summer programs achieve the Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) standards which have been endorsed by the Healthy Out-of-School Time (HOST) coalition. Research is needed to elucidate key mechanisms by which involvement in structured programming may reduce weight gain over the summer months.

Keywords

Obesity, Out-of-school time, Summer, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to ameliorate childhood obesity must target periods of time when youth are most vulnerable. School-age youth gain weight at an accelerated rate during the summer months as compared to the rest of the calendar year [1–3]. In addition, school year investments that address obesity are lost and often worsen beyond pre-intervention levels over the summer months [4–7].

Accumulating evidence suggests that *providing youth with structured programming during the summer months in the form of camps, community programming, and summer school summer learning and enrichment programs* may be a compelling solution to address accelerated weight gain during summer [8–13]. More research is needed,

Implications

Practice: School districts along with state and federal level institutions should examine their roles in improving affordability, enrollment, and attendance in summertime programming to help meet HEPA standards and reduce summertime weight gain.

Policy: Policymakers should explore initiatives to bolster partnerships between school districts and community organizations where the formation of shared use agreements for school facilities can improve access constraints, especially for low-income, minority school-age youth who appear to be at greater risk of summertime weight gain.

Research: More research should be conducted to examine the key mechanisms by which involvement in structured programming may reduce weight gain over the summer months.

particularly among school-age youth, to understand “how” and “why” involvement in structured summertime programming reduces weight gain [14–16].

BACKGROUND

The Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) standards were endorsed in 2011 by the Healthy Out-of-School Time (HOST) coalition, which includes organizations such as the National Afterschool Association, American Camp Association, National Summer Learning Association, and the National Recreation and Parks Association. The HEPA standards provide guidelines for afterschool and summer programs to ensure that youth meet the USDHHS 2008 National Recommendations regarding physical activity and nutrition [17]. Research on HEPA standards, however, suggest that they are not often being met due to barriers in infrastructure (e.g., limited budgets, lack

of adequate recreational spaces, added expense of fruit and vegetables) and staffing issues (e.g., motivation, limited training, high rates of turnover) [16, 18–21]. Programs need more guidance and training on how to cost-effectively implement strategies to achieve the HEPA standards given these challenges.

SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Summer is a time of disproportionate weight gain. Policies that support provision of high quality affordable summertime programming that leverage existing school and community resources and create new ones could potentially be a cost-effective strategy for reversing the obesity epidemic among America's youth. The implementation of these four policies will prioritize summertime as a key context in which weight gain is addressed:

1. Enhance existing offerings of high quality structured summertime programs by leveraging partnerships between school districts and community organizations to offer affordable summertime programming. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided a \$10 billion increase in Title I funds that included the development of new summer activities [22]. With only 14 million youth annually enrolled in summer programming, there are far too few participants, with many families indicating they cannot afford to enroll their children in summertime programs. Additional funds and new partnerships could be leveraged to subsidize programming fees generated via targeted education taxes. More work needs to be done though to garner support for such measures [23].
2. Schools and communities need to work together to create a summertime offerings office. Too often parents are unaware of various options for summertime programming, and having coordinators who work out of a community-summertime offerings office would reinforce the importance of summertime, as well as providing the logistical support to assist families in identifying summer programming that meets their needs.
3. Adoption of joint-use/shared use agreements between schools and communities that would allow for the provision of affordable summertime programming utilizing existing indoor and outdoor school facilities during the summer months.
4. Summertime programs need more support and incentives to implement strategies to help them achieve the HEPA standards endorsed by the National Afterschool Association [24]. Given the challenges faced by organizations, we suggest that summer programs need additional training and would benefit from additional financial support provided via the private or public sector to take on achieving the HEPA standards. In particular, strategies that incentivize programs to achieve these standards may be particularly useful in establishing new practices at the program level.

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Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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