



childhood obesity



March 2011 | www.rwjf.org

For the most current version of our strategy, please visit our website at www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is committed to tackling one of the most urgent threats to the health of our children and families—childhood obesity. Our goal is to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015.

Our strategy is to change public policies, school and neighborhood settings, and corporate practices in ways that make our communities healthier, with a particular focus on increasing access to healthy affordable foods and opportunities for physical activity.

We place special emphasis on reaching children who are at greatest risk for obesity or have limited access to healthy foods and safe places to play: African-American, Latino, American Indian and Asian/Pacific Islander children, and children living in lower-income areas. We do this because it's consistent with our founder's vision and our values as a Foundation to focus on those in our society who are most vulnerable and in greatest need.

We work on both sides of the energy-balance equation: calories in (food and beverages consumed) and calories burned (physical activity). Our tactics include funding local organizations to make positive changes at the community level, advocating for healthier policies in the public and private sectors, and

providing grants to researchers and evaluators to strengthen the evidence about what works. Our communications strategy underlies all of this work, increasing awareness about the issue, lifting up promising approaches for reversing the epidemic, and ensuring that researchers, advocates and communities

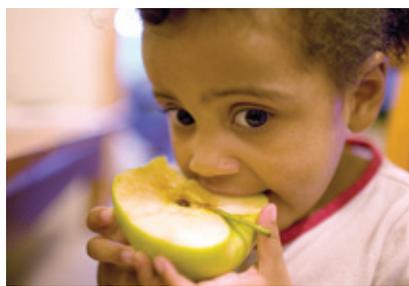
have the messages, tools and training they need to achieve their goals.

To be successful, the movement to prevent childhood obesity must harness talent and energy from every part of our society—schools, governments, community and nonprofit organizations, health care providers, media, the food and beverage industry, and, of course, parents. We believe that everyone has a role to play in preventing childhood obesity, and we're confident that, by working together, we will be successful.

THE PROBLEM

Childhood obesity threatens the health of our young people and their future potential. Today, approximately 23 million children and adolescents in the United States—nearly one in three young people—are either obese or overweight, putting them at higher risk for serious, even life-threatening health problems. If we don't reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, the current generation of young people could be the first in U.S. history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.

If we don't
the current gen
to live



The childhood obesity epidemic is particularly severe in communities of color. Thirty-eight percent of Latino children and 35.9 percent of African-American children ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with 29.3 percent of White children. There are also significant disparities in access to healthy foods and safe places to play. One major study of nearly 700 neighborhoods found that communities of color and racially mixed communities have access to fewer supermarkets than predominantly White communities. And communities with high levels of poverty are significantly less likely to have places where people can be physically active, such as parks, green spaces and bike lanes.

Obesity also poses a tremendous financial threat to our economy and our health care system. It's estimated that adult obesity costs our nation up to \$147 billion per year in medical expenses. Childhood obesity alone carries a huge price tag—up to \$14 billion per year in direct health care costs. Last year, a group of retired military leaders warned that childhood obesity also threatens our national security because so many young people aren't fit enough to serve our nation in uniform.

By reversing the childhood obesity epidemic, we will make our nation

healthier and stronger, save lives, ease the financial strain on our health care system, and increase economic productivity for the next generation of American workers.

WHAT WE FUND

RWJF funds efforts to change public policies, community environments and corporate practices in ways likely to improve nutrition and increase physical activity—both of which are critical to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic. We focus on six policy priorities that evidence suggests will have the greatest and longest-lasting impact on our children. These priorities can be supported by numerous approaches, some of which are listed below.

1. Ensure that all foods and beverages served and sold in schools meet or exceed the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Junk food has no place in our schools, whether it's served in cafeterias; sold through vending machines, school stores or fundraisers; or given away as classroom treats or rewards.

- RWJF supports the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools program, which provides in-person and online support to more than

10,000 schools working to improve their environments and encourage their students and staff to eat healthy and be active. The Alliance played a pivotal role in limiting unhealthy beverages on school grounds by brokering a historic agreement with the American Beverage Association and the nation's top three beverage companies in 2006. RWJF also is collaborating with The Pew Charitable Trusts on the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods project, which aims to promote strong federal standards for all foods and beverages served and sold in schools and to ensure that the 2010 law improving the federal school meals program is fully implemented.

2. Increase access to high-quality, affordable foods through new or improved grocery stores and healthier corner stores and bodegas. Research shows that having a supermarket or grocery store in a neighborhood increases residents' fruit and vegetable consumption and is associated with lower body mass index (BMI) among adolescents. Local governments can increase access to nutritious foods by working in partnership with the business community to bring new grocery stores and healthier corner stores and bodegas to underserved areas.

reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, generation of young people could be the first in U.S. history sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.

- RWJF is working closely with The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based advocacy organization dedicated to promoting access to affordable, nutritious food. The Food Trust has achieved tremendous success in bringing supermarkets back to underserved communities in Pennsylvania, and together we're seeking to replicate those results in other states. At the same time, RWJF's *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* program is helping 50 communities across the country reshape their environments to support healthy living and prevent childhood obesity. As part of this effort, many communities are building new farmers' markets and working to increase access to healthy foods in rural areas. Private-sector engagement is also a critical component of our food-access strategy. For example, we're currently funding an independent evaluation of a pledge by the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation (HWCF) to remove 1.5 trillion calories from the marketplace nationwide. The HWCF includes many of the nation's leading food and beverage manufacturers and retailers.

3. Increase the time, intensity and duration of physical activity during the school day and in out-of-school programs.

Schools can increase students' physical activity by requiring active participation in daily physical education classes and by finding creative ways to incorporate physical activity into the day. After-school programs located in schools, parks and recreational centers also can develop innovative ways to help children be active.

- With support from RWJF, Save the Children's Campaign for Healthy Kids is leading advocacy efforts in 16 Southern states to help children eat healthier foods and be more active. The program works with local advocates to identify important policy and environmental opportunities, and then crafts strategies for tackling them. Pioneering Healthier Communities, a program of The Y (formerly the YMCA of the USA), is working to change after-school programs run by the Y and others, so more children can be physically active outside the school day. RWJF is supporting the expansion of the program to more than 30 communities in at least six states.

4. Increase physical activity by improving the built environment in communities.

Communities can increase opportunities for physical activity by building new sidewalks, bike paths, parks and playgrounds and by improving those that already exist. To encourage families to use these resources and facilities, communities can implement traffic-safety measures and neighborhood watch programs, so children are safe when walking, biking or playing outside.

- The Safe Routes to School National Partnership works with local communities to encourage more children and adolescents to walk and bike to school safely. The partnership and its state networks focus on removing barriers to physical activity in lower-income communities, expanding sidewalks and bike lanes, and creating safer environments that encourage children to stay active. We also support *Communities Creating Healthy Environments*, which works in communities of color to address the root causes of the childhood obesity epidemic. CCHE is especially focused on recreation equity, ensuring that youths in traditionally underserved and underfunded areas have the same



opportunity to be physically active as their peers in wealthier communities. And *Active Living Research* continues to build the evidence base about which policies and programs most effectively support physical activity.

5. Use pricing strategies—both incentives and disincentives—to promote the purchase of healthier foods. Prices can significantly affect family food choices and are emerging as an important strategy in the movement to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic. We support research to assess the effectiveness of pricing strategies, both incentives that promote consumption of healthy foods and beverages and disincentives that discourage consumption of unhealthy products.

- Several RWJF programs are exploring the connection between food and beverage prices and children's health. Studies from *Healthy Eating Research* show that, when healthy foods like fruits and vegetables are more affordable, children are less likely to gain excess weight. The program also is examining how federal agricultural subsidies affect the production and prices of fruits and vegetables nationwide. Together, *Healthy Eating Research* and Bridging the Gap are contributing to the early body of research on the impact of sugar-sweetened beverage prices on childhood obesity rates.

6. Reduce youths' exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods through regulation, policy and effective industry self-regulation. Unhealthy foods and beverages are heavily marketed to children, and research shows that exposure to food marketing messages increases children's obesity risk. Some studies suggest that marketing

restrictions are among the most powerful and cost-effective interventions available.

- The Foundation is exploring how food and beverage marketing affects children's food preferences and their risk for obesity. With our support, the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University recently released a comprehensive analysis of fast-food marketing to children. The 2010 report found that fast-food advertising reaches children as young as 2 and rarely emphasizes healthier options. It also reported an increasing reliance on digital marketing techniques that target children directly, such as game-oriented websites and downloadable Smartphone programs. The National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN), created by Public Health Law and Policy and funded by RWJF, helps leaders in the field navigate complex legal and policy issues by providing the latest research and developing model policies for communities. Restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children is one of the program's key focus areas.

The Foundation also supports efforts to engage government leaders at all levels. *Leadership for Healthy Communities* explores how to create healthier, more vibrant communities with local, state, and federal officials and provides them with the resources they need to become obesity-prevention champions in their communities.

Reaching out to policy-makers is only part of the solution. The *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity* works with organizations and communities, as well as policy-makers, to shape and coordinate efforts to build a sustainable

national movement to prevent childhood obesity. The Center gathers the best available evidence to advance policy priorities, convenes stakeholders engaged in obesity-prevention activities, provides tools and resources to expand the movement's reach, and is a catalyst to stimulate action on the ground.

RWJF also is one of six founding organizations of the Partnership for a Healthier America, an independent, nonpartisan organization launched in support of First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign to prevent childhood obesity. The partnership is bringing together public, private and nonprofit leaders to secure sustained, measurable commitments toward the goal of reversing the epidemic, as well as to track the impact of those commitments.

The programs described in this document are only a sampling of the Foundation's efforts to prevent childhood obesity. For a full list of programs, visit www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity.

WHAT WE DON'T FUND

Because RWJF's strategy for reversing the childhood obesity epidemic hinges on changing policies and environments, we generally do not support projects that provide only information or education. Because we focus on preventing obesity, we do not invest in research regarding medical or surgical treatment of obesity. In keeping with Foundation policy, we give preference to proposals developed by public agencies and tax-exempt organizations.

RWJF does not accept unsolicited proposals for its work to prevent childhood obesity. We issue specific solicitations for proposals and ideas throughout the year. If you are registered to receive funding alerts through the Foundation's website at www.rwjf.org, you will receive e-mail notices of each funding opportunity.