Preventing Early Childhood Obesity in North Carolina

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Childhood obesity continues to be one of the largest public health crises in the nation. One-third of children and teens nationwide are overweight or obese,¹ and more than half of obese children become obese at or before the age of two.² Recent research indicating that lifelong health is largely determined during the formative years of early childhood³ points to the importance of establishing healthy lifestyle behaviors before children even enter school. North Carolina has the eleventh highest childhood obesity rate in the nation,⁴ and local stakeholders are working to reverse the trend by investing in developing healthy practices for the state’s youngest residents.

More than 200,000 North Carolina children under the age of six years spend all or part of their days in licensed child care centers⁵ where they consume up to two meals and two snacks a day. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC) Foundation recognizes that these centers represent an important opportunity to influence healthy behaviors in young children and has been collaborating with early childhood experts for the past decade through investments in three programs:

• Be Active Kids®, a BCBSNC Foundation Signature Program
• Preventing Obesity by Design (POD), a program out of the Natural Learning Initiative from NC State University’s College of Design
• Nutrition and Physical Activity Self Assessment for Child Care (NAP-SACC), out of the University of North Carolina’s Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

In order to truly impact early childhood obesity in North Carolina, BCBSNC Foundation recognized a comprehensive approach was needed and would build upon the successful aspects of each of these programs. BCBSNC Foundation created Shape NC: Healthy Starts for Young Children, a three-year, $3 million collaboration with The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. (NCPC).

PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK

NCPC is a state-level, nonprofit organization that administers funding to and collaborates with 76 Smart Start local partnerships that operate as independent nonprofit entities and serve all 100 North Carolina counties. These partnerships work closely with the child care centers in their geographic areas. BCBSNC Foundation and NCPC have a long history of working together on projects impacting healthy eating habits and active play for young children. NCPC’s dedication to quality early care and learning, its broad reach across North Carolina, and its accessible, centralized leadership made NCPC an ideal partner in this endeavor. In addition, a track record of collaboration helped each organization gain internal support and momentum for the new initiative.

MAIN INGREDIENTS

Shape NC improves policies, practices and outdoor environments in child care centers and communities to increase the number of young children starting school at a healthy weight. Shape NC is designed to work through the NCPC network of local partnerships by identifying and investing in three cohorts of grantees focused on making changes at the child care and community levels as well as working through a statewide Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Task Force led by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine to recommend change at the state level.

Through a competitive application process, Smart Start local partnerships apply to participate in Shape NC. The local partnerships then choose child care centers in their counties to serve as model early learning centers. Each of the child care centers receives a one-time grant of $3,000 as well as intensive assistance from regional specialists trained in the core principles of Shape NC: excellence in nutrition and physical activity practices, outdoor learning environments, health policy, and community and family engagement. Shape NC employs four specialists who focus on different regions of the state and train childcare professionals in best practices.

Model centers are evaluated using a specialized Shape NC assessment tool that measures the child care center’s overall ability to provide a healthy atmosphere for children. The tool evaluates active play and outdoor learning, nutritional...
value of food served, screen time, and staff support in modeling and promoting healthy behaviors. Based on the outcome of the assessment, regional specialists work with each model center's staff to make changes designed to positively impact the health of children in their care.

The specialists utilize nine training modules to instruct the center staff on a variety of health topics, engage in coaching and training activities, and connect staff to community resources. Shape NC specialists vary their technical support and assistance across the child care centers based on the individual needs of the center staff. For example, in centers that needed additional training on how to best utilize grant funding, a Shape NC specialist provided technical assistance in community collaboration and networking techniques. This assistance has led to leveraged donations of goods and services to benefit the child care centers. Through improved community engagement activities, many child care centers were able to secure volunteers to plant trees and vegetable gardens to improve the outdoor learning environment.

STEPS TO SUCCESS
Shape NC has an external evaluation process to measure progress toward desired outcomes. The Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the University of North Carolina is managing and conducting the evaluation, which includes the assessment of five specific goals focused at the center, community and state levels:
1. Creation of a long-term strategy blueprint for early childhood health
2. Creation and implementation of local community early childhood obesity prevention action plans
3. Increase in early childhood best practices in nutrition, physical activity and outdoor learning environments
4. Increase in number/percent of four-year-old children enrolled in the model centers who are at a healthy weight
5. Improvement in healthy behaviors for child care staff

Each goal includes specific annual objectives. Midway through the project, the Shape NC initiative is producing positive results in the child care centers as well as in the broader community and state settings. After a year and a half, evaluation results show that the eight child care centers in the first group are, on average, meeting 65 percent of best practices identified by Shape NC (up from 49 percent at baseline), with significant improvement in the areas of screen time, healthy beverages, outdoor play and healthy foods. They are on target to reach 75 percent of best practices. Halfway through Shape NC's second phase of grantees, the ten centers are, on average, meeting 52 percent of best practices (up from 31 percent at baseline), with significant improvement in screen time, active play and healthy foods and are on target to meet the end-of-project goals.

At the community level, all the Smart Start partnerships have convened community action teams of stakeholders, such as grantee child care centers, health departments, government agencies, local colleges, health care providers and schools systems. The teams have created locally designed action plans for obesity prevention and have begun implementing recommendations in their action plans.

At the state level Shape NC has made significant progress with the Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Task Force. The Task Force, organized by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine, is engaged in a process designed to pull together state and national recommendations related to improving healthy weight in children ages birth to five and to translate those recommendations into a blueprint of actionable strategies that can be implemented in North Carolina on the clinical, community and policy levels.

Full details of Shape NC's first year evaluation are available at http://www.smartstart.org/category/shape-nc/shape-nc-evaluation

MOVING FORWARD
The core goals of Shape NC will remain the same throughout the three-year grant period and beyond, but the initiative is open to adapting strategies and approaches to meet these goals. For example, in Shape NC's first year, specialists attempted to improve nutrition in child care centers by training center staff to model and promote healthy food choices among the children. This met with limited success, so Shape NC staff introduced new strategies to provide hands-on training in nutritious food preparation to child care center cooks. Shape NC will continue to track program strategies in order to meet the changing needs of child care centers in providing healthy atmospheres for children.

ABOUT NIHCM FOUNDATION, BCBSNC FOUNDATION, SMART START AND THE NORTH CAROLINA PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN, INC.
The National Institute for Health Care Management (NIHCM) Foundation works to engage health insurers in educational activities to improve their programs and policies on maternal, child and adolescent health issues. Our Promising Practices program was created to recognize these emerging and promising programs.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation is an independent, nonprofit foundation dedicated to improving the health and well-being of North Carolinians. BCBSNC Foundation focus areas include: Health of Vulnerable Populations, Healthy Active Communities, and Community Impact through Nonprofit Excellence. Since its inception in 2000, BCBSNC Foundation has invested more than $85 million into North Carolina communities. www.bcbsfoundation.org

Smart Start and the North Carolina Partnership for Children work to measurably increase the health and well-being of North Carolina’s children from birth to five by improving children’s early care and education programs so that they are safe, healthy and provided opportunities for children to learn skills they need for success in school; by providing parents with tools that support them in raising healthy, happy, successful children; and by ensuring that children have access to preventive health care. www.smartstart.org