INTEGRATING PARENT VOICES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY PREVENTION MATERIALS FOR FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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BACKGROUND

Childhood obesity is a health concern that touches even the youngest children. According to the Institute of Medicine report, Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Policies, almost 10% of infants and toddlers have high weight for length; over 20% of children 2-5 years are overweight or obese.

Early childhood has been identified as a critical period for obesity prevention. The way young children eat, move, and sleep can impact weight status at current and future developmental stages. Early childhood provides opportunities to establish healthy eating practices, good physical activity habits and optimal sleep routines before unhealthy patterns are engrained.

A frequent point of contact in the health care of young children, pediatricians are positioned to provide guidance on early obesity prevention. However, a 2009 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) needs assessment identified gaps in physicians' preparedness to address such issues.

In response to this need, the AAP initiated the Healthy Active Living for Families...Right from the Start (HALF) project to 1) develop, test, and implement a series of positive, family focused obesity prevention messages for families with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and 2) provide supporting materials for parent distribution and use at pediatric well visits to foster dialogue between families and health professionals. A hallmark of the HALF project is the commitment to a parent driven approach, with messaging and materials designed to "meet parents where they are."

METHODS

• 18 parent focus groups in NM, IL, LA, AL, NY & PA. At each site, at least 2 groups were conducted based on child age (Parents of Infants (ages birth-11 months) & Parents of Toddlers and Preschoolers (ages 1-5 years)). Project approved by AAP's Institutional Review Board.

RESULTS

• 113 parents took part in 18 groups
  ● 92% mothers
  ● <1/3 first time parents

• Race/ethnicity
  ● African-American = 37%
  ● Hispanic = 24%
  ● White = 45%

• 75% of children were publicly insured

• >85% of parents described childhood obesity as a serious or somewhat serious problem; 90% assessed their own child's weight as "just right"

The unique needs of the young child population, incorporating elements of the 5-2-1-0 health promotion model plus breastfeeding were tested through Evaluative focus groups in diverse settings.

RESULTS (cont'd)

• All messages did not resonate with parents!

What detracted from message endorsement?

1) Use of "obesity language" – especially related to infants

- I don't want to hear obesity language... I am talking about my baby, my heart baby...
- It feels like I'm reading a textbook

- Did the message provide new information? Would the message be accepted? Would it be actionable?

2) Guidance focused on future outcomes

- Regardless of what's said, they're going to stick to their guns (insensitive to message discouraging sweetened drinks)

3) Limited knowledge of recommendations

- My kid gets juice all the time…that's how he gets his fruit
- I don't think I'm buying into this

4) Disconnect between guidance and personal experience

- She watches what you eat and do to stay healthy"
- It's like they're showing a picture of someone else (compared to message discouraging sweetened drinks)

What contributed to message endorsement?

1) Respect for parents' expertise

The message "Being a parent is an important job! When you set a good example, your baby learns healthy habits. She watches what you eat and do to stay healthy" was ranked the MOST IMPORTANT message by parents in EVERY GROUP.

2) Explanation of the "why" behind recommendations

- They are concerned if I'm giving them something to eat...so I can't always just give them juice
- These are tips that they might not have thought of

3) Action strategies to promote/support behavior change

- They don't really teach you how to keep your baby healthy in the 1st year
- A list of good snacks would be helpful – strategies with that

Next Steps

• Additional web-based materials will be released this summer, including an informational widget and healthy, active living parent quiz – housed on AAP's consumer website: www.healthychildren.org

• Companion physician implementation guide in development

• "Start Today" poster available to encourage early discussions about healthy weight

LIMITATIONS

• Focus group participants were self-selected and may not be representative of all parents with young children

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• HALF Project Editorial Board: Co-Chairs Sandra G. Hassink, MD, FAAP and Paula Duncan, MD, FAAP; members Navroto Anyakoh, MD, MPH, FAAP; Kim Avila Edwards, MD, FAAP; Jon Korfmacher, PhD, Ms Tamaia Milan, and Elsie Taveras, MD, MPH, FAAP

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