Giving kids a CHANCE: Innovative program helps parents shape family eating and activity behaviors to promote healthy weights

Collaboration for Health, Activity, and Nutrition in Children’s Environments (CHANCE)

CHANCE is a multi-component initiative in New York (NY) state designed to promote behavioral and environmental changes that help low-income families prevent childhood obesity and promote good health.1

Translational research within CHANCE has explored how environments and behaviors interact to affect health. CHANCE includes community partnerships to change the environments that influence children, plus behavioral education workshops for parents and caregivers of 3-11 year old children. These workshops focus on the positive – promoting healthy eating and active play – and integrate new parenting skills to help shape children’s choices and strengthen relationships.

Paths to Success: Taking steps to improve health

CHANCE focuses on six crucial nutrition and physical activity behaviors important for preventing unhealthy weight gain and promoting health. Families are asked to choose steps to take along these “Paths to Success:”

- drink low- or non-fat milk and water instead of sweetened beverages,
- eat more vegetables and fruits,
- play actively,
- eat fewer high-fat and high-sugar foods (including fast food and snacks),
- limit TV and computer time, and
- eat sensible servings.

Keys to Success: Parenting strategies that work

A unique feature of CHANCE is the development and field-testing of a new curriculum that integrates parenting education with nutrition and physical activity. The curriculum, Healthy Children, Healthy Families: Parents Making a Difference! (HCHF) applies parenting skills characteristic of effective parents to scenarios related to child eating and active play.

The “Keys to Success” cover specific steps to help parents interact with and influence their children by role-modeling, being supportive, offering choices within limits, and shaping home environments. The “Keys” are strategies for making progress on the “Paths to Success.”

Each 90-minute session includes a fun “active play break” and food tasting or food-based activities. Each week, parents choose a new behavior to try at home with their children.

HCHF is feasible and sustainable

HCHF is implemented within USDA’s Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in NY. HCHF was developed and tested with extensive input from community educators and parents to ensure that it works well in real-life program settings.

HCHF workshops for parents are delivered by paraprofessional community nutrition educators, who are mentored by nutrition and parenting professionals in the Cooperative Extension system. Through partnerships with agencies serving low-income families, small groups of parents are recruited to attend HCHF series consisting of 8 weekly sessions. A pilot study assessed parents’ response to HCHF qualitatively and quantitatively.
Parents make a difference!

Evaluation found statistically significant improvements in food, activity, and parenting practices in a sample of 210 HCHF graduates.²

Scores improved significantly on 14 of the 16 behaviors measured. Parents reported reduced soda and fast food intake, higher dairy, vegetable, and fruit intakes for themselves and their children (see chart below). They reported more child active play, less TV watching, and more effective parenting practices. A few behaviors such as eating meals together were common at program entry, leaving little room to improve.

The chart shows that large proportions of the parents made meaningful changes in behavior of at least 1 or 2 points (out of 5-pt scale). In the most widespread change, half of the parents reported reducing how often they ate takeout, convenience and fast foods with their children.

Parents responded positively and actively to workshops

Parents talked about changes they made at home during and after HCHF:

"I go for a walk almost every night of the week and we’re trying to eat more meals together as a family."

“When I gave the kids options of what they can have, instead of telling them what they can’t have, the house was peaceful and the kids were pleased with the decisions they made.”

“I used to dish up servings that were way too big for my kids... Now I let them serve themselves. They are happier at the table and seem to know when they are full.”

Implications for practice

Parents and staff responded enthusiastically to the HCHF workshop series and the curriculum was refined with their input. It is now being used more widely, with 979 HCHF graduates across 14 counties in New York by the end of 2013, and programs beginning in other states. Originally designed for a low-income audience, the curriculum is appropriate for all parents of 3-11 year-olds and also for staff of programs for preschool and school-aged children.

HCHF helps families improve the key nutrition and physical activity behaviors that research has shown to be important for preventing childhood obesity. Instead of just telling parents what to change, HCHF gives them the chance to learn how to shape children’s choices by using effective parenting practices.

For more information
