



AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY HEALTH CARE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

APHCRI LINKAGE & EXCHANGE TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP REPORT

**Stream Four Report: Preventing overweight & obesity in young children:
synthesising the evidence for management & policy making**

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A COMPARISON OF THE RESULTS FROM STREAM FOUR PROJECT SET WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Results of our Stream Four project highlighted a number of key issues:

- Despite the existence of innovative preventative policies within Australia to promote healthy weight that focus beyond the child on strengthening the role of parents, families, communities and particularly primary health care services and providers, the translation of such policies into practice will require overcoming key barriers (organisational, attitudinal, knowledge and skills, research and resource barriers) that are presently limiting the level of engagement of primary health care providers, parents and other carers
- Given the highly complex nature of the issue, and the fact that it covers a number of jurisdictions (health, education, family and community services, social environment) it is clear that decision makers require different types of evidence (process, impact, feasibility, cost effectiveness) to make informed decisions on how best to address these barriers. Moreover, given the lack of "excellent" evidence, based on randomised controlled trials, the study indicated a need for a methodology that assessed the quality of programs based on "best available evidence", highlighting "promising" programs and their relevance in different settings and contexts
- To date the greatest emphasis in promoting healthy weight among children has been placed on school-aged children with limited programs or policies aimed at promoting healthy weight among pre-school children – a process that does not adequately recognise that food preferences, and also to some extent the sedentary lifestyles, of children are generally well-established by the time they reach school age - the report therefore focused on the need for more research into promising programs for developing health lifestyle habits among toddlers

- Finally, the Stream Four report highlighted the significant differences between local jurisdictions and health care settings and recommended the development of a portfolio of alternative interventions, with the aim to enable decision makers to select an appropriate mix of strategies based on local needs and resources

Comparisons can be drawn with each country we visited. In England, similar policy changes encouraging greater community engagement with primary health care providers and other allied health care workers have been promoted through a number of key policy papers *Choosing Health*, *Every Child Matters*, and *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say*. The aim of these policies is to:

- Reflect public health priorities and to tackle key issues, for example, prevention of obesity, rather than illness focus
- Ensure the NHS contributes to the achievement of these through planning, commissioning and partnerships with local Government, voluntary, business sectors, public
- Create a system that promotes well-being and reduces health inequalities

To achieve these aims, general practice-based local Primary Care Trusts (PCT's) have been established with autonomy to commission teams of allied health care workers or other providers to address issues such as social care and education that impact on health at the local level. In the Greater Birmingham area, which was the focus of our visit, there are three PCT's, each working largely on their own, and while many promising projects are emerging, limited collaboration existed either between the PCTs or with the key national bodies, such as the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) that develops guidelines and guidance for tackling issues or the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, which provides support in delivery, quality and values and leadership. Consequently, many of the barriers highlighted in our initial report were also evident in England. Furthermore, as found in our report, once again by far the greatest emphasis was on promoting healthy weight among school aged children and few significant studies had looked at preschool children.

In southern Alberta, Canada, we looked specifically at the knowledge translation process, as the Decision Support Research Team (DSRT) had completed their systematic review prior to ours and were further down the process. Jointly affiliated with the University of Calgary, the DSRT is located within the Calgary Health Region building to facilitate greater collaboration and translation of research into practice. Calgary Health Region has embraced a community development model, with emphasis on the broader preventative components of 'growing up healthy' rather than on school-based efforts to deal with overweight and obesity. Primary health care networks collaborate with research and funding bodies (Calgary Health Region and the Southern Alberta Child and Youth Health Network) to develop and deliver a common message on 'healthy eating and active living' through social marketing, community awareness and education activities, environmental supports, strengthened research and primary health care provider capacity.

In Georgia, the Policy Leadership for Active Youth (PLAY) Council on Childhood Obesity, have embraced the notion that lifestyle patterns and healthy eating habits develop from a young age, and that primary prevention of overweight begins in the home environment, with parents and other family members as primary transmitters of lifestyle behaviours, especially during preschool years. To this end, PLAY have developed a three year policy research initiative with the Georgia State University Institute of Public Health in partnership with the Georgia Centre for Obesity and Related Disorders (GCORD) at the University of Georgia and the Medical College of Georgia (all of whom we visited). This inter-disciplinary group collaborates with other stakeholders including Government and voluntary organisations, as well as funding bodies such as the Healthcare Georgia Foundation and the Arthur Blank Foundation.

The group hosted a state-wide summit that brought together about 140 individuals, including public officials, educators, clinicians, public health researchers and practitioners, and advocates for children's health. The summit had six key findings all of which align with the results of our Stream Four report:

- Engaging families is an essential component in the prevention of childhood overweight and this process must begin from an early age
- Health professionals must serve an important role in preventing overweight by incorporating strategies and activities that are appropriate to their practice patterns and patients' needs
- Schools, preschools, and child care facilities, in partnership with health care providers, families and communities can serve a vital role in supporting the promotion of healthy lifestyles among children through policy interventions
- Communities can serve as a focal point to mobilise family engagement and should provide the context, environment and opportunity for healthy lifestyles
- Innovative programs need to be evaluated and greater emphasis needs to be placed on disseminating successful programs
- Effective approaches require consistent data collection, as well as staff training and capacity building.

Overall, it was clear from our visits that there are a range of contextual, content and process factors that determine the success of initiatives to engage primary care providers and parents in childhood obesity prevention. Most important amongst these are:

- A policy mandate, leadership and funding commitment to prevention programs and resources to orient primary care service delivery systems more towards prevention
- A mechanism at service level for strategic planning and sustained communication and co-ordination of services with agencies outside health to ensure consistent messages and comprehensive services to families and communities
- Community readiness and access to prevention programs within existing community services to ensure successful and sustainable engagement of families