A Family Approach to Early Childhood Obesity Prevention
HKHF by the Numbers

500+
Head Start families and staff have been reached by HKHF through training, education and capacity-building efforts.

300+
Head Start families and staff have participated in the HKHF Walk Challenge, walking over 48,000 miles.

130
Head Start families and staff have participated in an innovative pilot program called Farm to Family that brings subsidized shares of local produce to Head Start centers.

250+
Head Start families and staff have participated in HKHF’s nutrition education programs, including Healthy Eating Tours, cooking workshops, and the We CAN! curriculum developed by the National Institutes of Health.

1,000+
Children and their parents/caregivers have participated in HKHF’s Open Gym, the only free, ongoing play program for Boston families with young children.

127
Northeastern University students have worked with the Open Gym program.

3,200+
Service-learning and volunteer hours have been contributed to the Open Gym program by Northeastern University students.

Release date: December 2012

Program Description

Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures (HKHF) aims to prevent early childhood obesity by supporting health promoting behaviors among families with young children. HKHF is a collaborative, multi-sectoral partnership between Northeastern University, Boston Children’s Hospital, Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Inc. Head Start and the City of Boston’s Boston Centers for Youth & Families (BCYF). HKHF is housed at the Institute on Urban Health Research within the Bouvé College of Health Sciences at Northeastern University. Drawing on the missions and strengths of each partner organization, this unique collaboration seeks to improve the health of Boston families that are disproportionately at risk of obesity. Since HKHF was founded in 2009, HKHF’s partners have worked together to develop and implement an effective combination of program components that promote healthy eating and increased physical activity in the environments where children learn (preschool) and play (community). Each of these program components are designed to provide information, skills, and tools that translate to changes in health behaviors at the family level.

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Key Program Impact

Family Participation in Early Childhood Obesity Prevention
While the obesity epidemic and childhood obesity have received growing attention nationwide, early childhood obesity is only more recently being recognized as a critical public health issue. Over 26% of preschoolers in the U.S. are overweight or obese, and rates are even higher among low-income and minority children. For example, close to 40% of Head Start children in Boston are overweight or obese. Figures like these are particularly concerning because children who are obese in their preschool years are more likely to be obese and to develop serious medical conditions linked to obesity as adolescents and adults. At the same time, the preschool years represent a unique opportunity to address obesity early on and to form family health behaviors that can have a positive impact across the lifespan. Given the key role that families play in shaping children’s health behaviors, HKHF takes a holistic approach to involving families in early childhood obesity prevention.
HKHF engages families in preschool and community settings by employing behavioral and environmental change strategies that families can apply at home to support healthy eating and physical activity.

**Capacity Building**

HKHF draws on the resources of its two institutional funding partners, Northeastern University and Boston Children's Hospital, to build capacity among its community partners, ABCD Head Start and BCYF, both of whom have established relationships with families that are disproportionately at risk of obesity. Through close, needs-oriented collaborations, HKHF expands the existing infrastructure and programming offered by its community partners, while also strengthening the relationships between community partners and the families they serve. HKHF offers self-assessment, training, and technical assistance services to its community partners in order to strengthen their organizational cultures and policies around health behaviors. In addition, HKHF provides assistance with design and evaluation of evidence-based programming.

Head Start is the nation’s largest federally funded early childhood education program, and ABCD Head Start serves over 2,500 low-income children in Boston. ABCD Head Start’s nutrition services department has a long history of working on obesity prevention with families. HKHF has enabled ABCD Head Start to expand its commitment to obesity prevention by offering new programming and carrying out strategic planning processes it might not otherwise have had the capacity to implement. These include conducting the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) and convening working groups to increase culturally diverse, healthy foods served in meals and to improve communication with families about children’s weight status and Body Mass Index.

BCYF is the City of Boston’s largest youth and human service agency, and it provides free and affordable programs for children and families through its network of 35 community centers across the city. The partnership with HKHF has allowed BCYF to fill a gap in the programming it is able to offer to families with young children through the weekly Open Gym program.

**Student Leadership through Community Service**

HKHF draws on Northeastern University’s commitment to experiential learning and provides valuable opportunities for students that promote civic engagement, encourage career exploration, and raise personal and professional awareness of obesity as an important public health issue. To date, 127 Northeastern University undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of disciplines have contributed over 3,200 volunteer and service-learning hours to HKHF’s Open Gym program. HKHF has a strong training and support system for student volunteers and is exploring opportunities to replicate its programming and provide service opportunities for other populations, including high school students, community members, and employee groups.
Through its partnerships with ABCD Head Start and BCYF, HKHF is able to offer programming for young children and their adult caregivers (parents/caregivers and teachers) that focuses on two key elements of obesity prevention: healthy eating and physical activity. HKHF works to promote family health behavior changes through education, skills training, competence building, and environmental changes that make healthy food and physical activity available, affordable and accessible.

In collaboration with ABCD Head Start, HKHF offers integrated programming that is open to both staff and families at four partner Head Start sites in Boston. In addition, HKHF partners with BCYF to increase opportunities for young children to be physically active with their families in safe, accessible and age-appropriate settings, particularly in communities where such opportunities are limited and the cost for existing programs poses a financial barrier. At BCYF’s recreation division headquarters in Roxbury, HKHF offers the Open Gym program, the only free, ongoing play program for Boston families with young children.

Healthy Eating Promotion

Farm to Family

Farm to Family (F2F) is an innovative program designed to make affordable, fresh produce easily available to low-income families with young children. Program components include weekly farm shares of local produce purchased at a subsidized rate, bilingual educational materials, farm newsletters and recipes, and farm field trips. HKHF worked with an expanded group of community partners (including ABCD Head Start, The Food Project, Boston Children’s Hospital, The Dimock Center, and Bowdoin Street Health Center) to develop and pilot the F2F program in 2011. 130 staff and
families from the Head Start sites that partner with HKHF participated in the F2F program in 2011 and 2012. F2F has continued to grow in 2012, and has received national attention as a model for addressing food access disparities.

**Nutrition Education**
HKHF has offered a variety of nutrition education opportunities to Head Start staff and families, including Healthy Eating Tours, cooking workshops, and the Ways to Enhance Children’s Activity & Nutrition (We CAN!) curriculum developed by the National Institutes of Health. In collaboration with the Boston Public Health Commission and ABCD Head Start’s nutrition services department, HKHF developed and implemented curricula for a Supermarket Healthy Eating Tour and a Farmers’ Market Healthy Eating Tour. The Healthy Eating Tours are designed to promote fruit and vegetable consumption, offer strategies for healthful shopping on a budget, and build awareness of programs in the City of Boston that offer discounts at farmers’ markets for low-income shoppers.

- **117 Head Start staff and families have received the We CAN! Curriculum** developed by the National Institutes of Health, including food service staff across all ABCD Head Start programs in Boston.

- **72 Head Start staff and families have attended Supermarket and Farmers’ Market Healthy Eating Tours.**

- **In total, over 250 Head Start staff and families have participated in HKHF nutrition education programs** since 2009.

“We get different vegetables every single week. The last three weeks my bags...had arugula, parsley, cilantro, turnips, collard greens, kale, apples every week, sweet potatoes, regular potatoes, carrots every single week. I mean fresh. The dirt is still on them. Also, they give you a list of everything that they offer in the bag and then they give you a recipe for one of things in the bag. Like when they gave us kale they told us how to make kale chips. So I made kale chips for the kids...it was really cool.”

— Farm to Family participant
Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures

Physical Activity Promotion

Walk Challenge
HKHF has offered the Walk Challenge at Head Start partner sites since 2009, and the program has become increasingly popular. Participation has increased each year, from 48 staff and families in 2009 to 112 in 2012. Over a period of six weeks, participants use pedometers to track their daily steps and work toward the goal of walking 100 miles or more. Results are posted each week, and participants receive incentives and prizes at the end of the Walk Challenge based on their performance. The goal of the Walk Challenge is to increase levels of physical activity among Head Start staff and parents/caregivers, who serve as role models for the children they teach and care for. The Walk Challenge represents a cultural and systems-level change for participating Head Start sites and is anticipated with excitement each spring.

- Over 300 Head Start staff and families have participated in the HKHF Walk Challenge, walking over 48,000 miles.

- The Walk Challenge resulted in a significant increase in physical activity levels among staff and families. Participants reported a 26% and a 17% increase in the number of days they were physically active for an hour or more during the last seven days and during a typical week, respectively, as compared to those not enrolled in the Walk Challenge, even when physical activity level pre-Walk Challenge was taken into account.

Open Gym
The primary goal of Open Gym is to create an environment that encourages young children ages 3-8 and their families to be active together and to promote open, non-fee based recreational use of Boston’s community centers. Open Gym is a weekly, 90-minute play program held on Saturday mornings at BCYF’s Recreation Center at Madison Park. Play equipment is set up in a large, open space to facilitate individual, small and large group play. Children and adults are free to transition between supervised, well-monitored activities at their own pace. Activities are designed to engage children and adults in moderate to vigorous physical activity. Open Gym is staffed by Northeastern University students who serve as Student Activity Leaders. It takes place year round, with three cycles (Winter/Spring, Summer, and Fall) offered each year.

“Although service-learning [with Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures] required a lot of work, I enjoyed every minute of it and am thankful that I had the opportunity to work with such a great program, and truly feel that I have made a difference in the lives of others as well as my own life.”

— Open Gym student volunteer

Since 2009, HKHF has offered 99 Saturday Open Gym sessions. Open Gyms are typically bustling with activity, and attendance averages 55 adults and children per week. Participants reflect the demographics of Boston residents bearing a disproportionate burden of chronic diseases such as obesity, with 29% of participating families reporting that they are Latino and 44% African American. While most caregivers that attend Open Gym are mothers (68%), 24% are fathers.

- Over 350 Boston families with young children have attended Open Gym, representing over 1,000 parents/caregivers and children.

- Open Gym keeps families coming back: 35% of families have attended more than one Open Gym cycle, and 30% of families have attended half or more of the sessions in a given cycle.
Program Evaluation & Dissemination

Given HKHF’s unique work as one of only a few holistic obesity prevention programs for families with young children, it has been actively working to share its conceptual model, evaluation results, and accomplishments over the last four years. HKHF program evaluation activities have engaged both institutional and community partners, and have resulted in ten national presentations at professional conferences, as well as a series of peer-reviewed publications (listed below).


“I like that Open Gym is free. It’s rare to find an indoor activity that happens on a regular basis that is affordable...My son and I really look forward to Open Gym, and I make an effort to schedule our Saturdays around it!”

— Open Gym parent

For more information

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