



Childhood obesity has been recognized as a national epidemic and every effort to curb the problem is a meaningful investment to foster healthy growth and development. The research has allowed us to make modest beginnings in addressing childhood obesity. Health-promoting and obesity-reducing activities have been introduced into the Head Start curriculum. To that end this project has initiated activities to help children learn to eat more vegetables and engage in physical activity regularly.

The Influence of Environmental Interventions on Childhood Obesity of Preschoolers in Southwestern Mississippi

Who cares and why?

The obesity epidemic has affected every section of the population. A problem once considered to affect only adults, is now spreading to children with one in three children being either obese or overweight by their first birthday.

Overweight or obese preschoolers are five times as likely to be overweight or obese as adults, experts note. The obesity problem is even more severe in Mississippi which has the second highest incidence of obesity in the country. The problem is even graver in minority- and low-income communities.

What has the project done so far?

Alcorn State University researchers have created the My Body Matters (MBM) project to address childhood obesity. With key missions to Educate, Energize and Exercise, the project: educates children about healthy eating; energizes children through healthy eating; and teaches children through coordinated exercises to engage in meaningful physical activity. Healthy eating habits are promoted as children engage in vegetable gardening activities. The participants are encouraged to be physically active as they engage in the already established Head Start curriculum, “I’m Moving, I’m Learning (IMIL)” and also through a structured, outdoor physical-

One in five African-American children is either overweight or obese. The southwest region of Mississippi is highly populated with low-income African-American families. Addressing obesity will not only improve health but will also enhance school readiness and foster healthy behaviors in young children for a life-long impact. With the project’s intent of addressing obesity in young children, Head Start programs were selected as ideal platforms to promote healthful behaviors.

education curriculum developed through the MBM project.

Since its launch in 2011, the MBM project has engaged 560 preschool children in the Adams and



Jefferson County Head Start Centers through the raised-bed vegetable gardens built with the collaborative efforts of the Alcorn Cooperative Extension Program. As part of their regular outdoor regimen, the children participated in building vegetable gardens. In addition, the corresponding parent-education seminars and teacher

workshops cultivated an adult audience. A field trip to the Alcorn Experiment Station and Model Farm extended vegetable gardening beyond the boundaries

of the children's Head Start setting. The project kick-off for the 2013-2014 school year drew local media attention.

The MBM project activities in Adams and Jefferson counties have created visibility for Alcorn's efforts in



childhood obesity prevention. The Wilkinson County Head Start Center has evinced interest in adopting the project. Support has been rendered to Wilkinson County Head Start since 2013. The project has also raised awareness and community support by showcasing the project at high schools health and wellness fairs.



Impact Statement

Alcorn researchers have:

Designed and launched a comprehensive program encompassing nutrition, physical activity, and parent education components which are vital to obesity prevention initiatives.

Strengthened the capabilities of Alcorn to address the increasing problem of childhood obesity in minority communities of southwestern Mississippi.

Established working collaborations between the academic and Extension arm of Alcorn's School of Agriculture, Research, Extension and Applied Sciences (AREAS).

Created a partnership between the Department of Human Sciences and the Alcorn Cooperative Extension Program to engage in establishing vegetable gardens at Head Start Centers and to improve the effectiveness of Alcorn in addressing the needs of local communities.

What research is needed?

Research regarding childhood obesity has focused solely on either early childhood settings or parent education programs. There is a great need to ensure that education be provided early in childhood settings that translate to the home environment. Research efforts typically have focused on school age children when most behaviors have already been established. Efforts focused at the preschool level should be more effective and preventive. Despite extensive efforts directed at parent education, even more parental involvement is needed because parents are the prime agents to instill healthy behaviors in young lives.

Want to know more?

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Strategic Priority: Human Health, Nutrition, Obesity Prevention

Additional Links: <http://www.umes.edu/ard/Default.aspx?id=46285>

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