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A New Exercise in Combatting Childhood Obesity: Summer Learning Programs

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This week in San Diego, thought leaders, policy makers and health experts are convening for the [6th Biennial Childhood Obesity Conference](#), the nation's largest collaboration of professionals dedicated to combating child obesity, to showcase the latest research, best practices and strategies toward reducing our country's ballooning childhood obesity rates.

One strategy I hope they'll discuss is **expanding children's access to summer learning programs** as a means of preventing summertime weight gain and obesity.

[Research](#) clearly shows that children who do not participate in summertime learning programs not only suffer academically but are more likely to face health consequences as well.

Too much junk food and sedentary activities (watching TV, sitting on the couch playing video games) and not enough healthy meals and exercise often adds up to summertime weight gain, especially among children from low-income households who disproportionately gain weight in summer. This is often because they aren't taking part in summer learning programs due to economic circumstances and lack of local programs, or because neighborhood crime makes it unsafe to play and exercise outside.

This **summertime weight gain** is contributing to the alarming state of our country's **childhood obesity epidemic**, where the proportion of overweight children in the U.S. has nearly tripled over the past three decades. One out of three children in the U.S. are overweight or obese and 75 percent of overweight children will become overweight or obese adults, putting them at grave risk for high blood pressure and hypertension, gallbladder disease, Type II Diabetes, cardiovascular disease and even premature death.

In his alarming [report](#), "*The (Not So) Skinny on Summertime AND Child Obesity*," U.C. Irvine Professor Joseph L. Mahoney details the clear connection between children's access to summer learning programs and weight gain, finding:

- Children's sedentary summertime activities are significantly associated with child obesity.
- Children gained more than twice as much weight during the summer than during the school year.
- Summertime weight gain intensified the racial/ethnic gap in obesity.
- Summer weight gain undermines otherwise effective obesity treatments during the school year.
- Low-income students who participate in organized summertime activities were less likely to be obese.

Here in California, a [report](#) released this month by California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) reveals that more than 80% (two million) of California's children who ate subsidized school lunches during the last academic year did not eat lunch served through the federal summer nutrition programs in July 2010. Entitled, "*School's Out... Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California*," the CFPA report pinpoints budget cuts to summer school as the main reason why low-income children lost access to free, nourishing meals last summer.

By promoting healthy eating and physical activity, and providing access to healthy meals, summer learning programs are a key part of the solution to preventing childhood obesity when school is out of session.

Luckily, there is growing recognition and support for summer learning programs as an effective way to prevent childhood obesity and promote healthy eating and exercise habits.

At the national level, First Lady Michelle Obama and the Obama administration have championed the importance of summer learning programs as a critical means of combatting childhood obesity through their [Let's Read. Let's Move](#) initiative.

In California, summer learning programs across the state working with the nonprofit organization [Partnership for Children and Youth](#) are making healthy eating and exercise part of their everyday curriculum. Physical activity and nutrition are integral to their programs, engaging children in fun, hands-on activities - from outdoor games to cooking demos - to teach them about healthy food and fitness.

With 90 days of summer, and ample opportunities to engage children in healthy eating and exercise and instill healthier habits they'll be motivated to maintain throughout the rest of the year, summer learning programs are clearly an important ingredient in preventing childhood obesity. Now we need to invest in expanding access to summer learning programs so that every child has the opportunity to exercise their right to a healthier summer.

To learn more about the connection between summertime and child obesity, please see: [The \(Not So\) Skinny on Summertime AND Child Obesity](#); [School's Out... Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California](#); and [Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2011](#), by the Food Research and Action Center.

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