

GUIDE TO GIVING Childhood Obesity Prevention: Nutrition



HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

STEP 1 Understanding the Recommended Approach to Preventing Childhood Obesity

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Are you interested in preventing childhood obesity? This guide will help you assess the effectiveness of the nonprofits you are considering supporting. It is based on Social Impact Research's (SIR) methodology for analyzing nonprofits, which identifies the best approaches for addressing the targeted social issue. For more information, read SIR's social issue and state reports on preventing childhood obesity.

An effective nonprofit should incorporate all three components of the recommended approach – or partner with other organizations to cover the full range of services represented by these components. In addition, effective nonprofits should collect data to measure the outcomes and impact of their programs.

- A. Education about healthy habits
- B. Experience in a healthy lifestyle
- C. Outreach to parents and caregivers
- D. Outcomes and Impact

SIR determined that as part of a holistic community initiative, programs using the recommended approach (described below) to improve childhood nutrition and physical activity provide a good opportunity for donors and funders interested in preventing childhood obesity. SIR has developed separate guides for each intervention, as most organizations do not focus on both areas. This is a guide to evaluate **nutrition** programs. Many nutrition programs refer to themselves as nutrition, cooking, or healthy habits programs rather than obesity prevention programs.

DEFINITION

Childhood obesity prevention encourages development of healthy eating and exercise habits in children ages 2 to 19 that will keep them from becoming overweight or obese. Addressing this issue requires holistic community initiatives that include policy and environmental changes, as well as programs that educate individuals about healthy behaviors. This report concentrates on the educational component, which enables healthy habits to be developed and sustained.

COMPONENTS OF THE RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Nutrition programs vary widely. SIR has found that high-quality programs have the following components:

- Education about healthy habits to inform children and adolescents about nutrition and physical activity
- Experience in a healthy lifestyle that exposes children and adolescents to recommended activities
- Outreach to parents and caregivers who can facilitate and model healthy habits

To be most effective, successful direct service educational programs should operate as part of a community initiative that is simultaneously addressing needed policy and environmental changes for a healthier community.

See our social issue report for more information.

STEP 2 Evaluate the Program's Effectiveness through the Lens of the Recommended Approach

A. Evaluate the quality of education

The educational component of a nutrition program must reflect the needs of participants and the communities in which they live, and consider duration and intensity.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Curriculum is created based on current scientific data and community needs, with expert input (e.g. registered dietitians) and updated at least annually as new guidelines emerge
- ✓ Organizations directly teach participants about choosing healthy foods
- ✓ Program is at least six weeks long with sessions at least twice a week; structured as a cohort model

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Curriculum is created without consulting experts or recent nutritional information, and the needs of the community are not considered
- ✗ Curriculum information is available online or in brochure form only
- ✗ Program is less than six weeks with sessions once a week or less; participants opt in or out of each class



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Participants are taught to be peer educators, enabling greater ownership of the curriculum

Participants work on awareness-raising projects, such as creating nutritional information posters for school cafeterias

B. Evaluate the quality of experiences

Experiences can expand participants' knowledge of what healthy foods look and taste like, where to find them, and how to incorporate them into daily meals.



Examples of

EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Participants are encouraged to share what they learn through student presentations and taking healthy food home

Staff encourage participants to record what they eat to increase awareness of habits

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Participants grow simple crops, purchase healthy ingredients and prepare dishes, or eat healthy foods
- ✓ Participants visit farmers' markets, grocery stores, gardens, or other healthy food sites and discuss why particular foods are healthy
- ✓ Expert guests such as farmers, chefs, families, and community members supplement the program to act as role models and provide demonstrations

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Participants are *shown* but not provided the opportunity to grow, prepare, or eat healthy foods
- ✗ Participants learn about where healthy foods can be found in the community, but they do not visit any sites
- ✗ Curriculum is taught entirely by program staff without any demonstrations or guest participation

C. Evaluate the quality of outreach

Involving parents and caregivers helps reinforce healthy food habits, enabling families to make healthier choices and ultimately empowering parents to advocate for change.



Examples of

EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

Outreach expands beyond parents and caregivers to include the community. For example:

- Participants meet with school or local officials to discuss community nutrition
- Participants conduct cooking demonstrations for the community

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Parents and caregivers are invited to sample participants' cooking, take part in gardening days, or join site visits
- ✓ Curriculum includes take-home assignments; for example, sharing family recipes or cultural food knowledge
- ✓ Information on making healthy choices is shared with families, for example a handout on understanding food labels

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Parents or caregivers are rarely, if ever, invited to participate in program activities
- ✗ Curriculum does not include take-home assignments that encourage family participation
- ✗ Program does not acknowledge parent and caregiver behavior or their position as primary food purchasers

D. Evaluate outcomes and impact

Evaluating outcomes and impact is difficult for nutrition programs because of restrictive state and federal funding. "Medical diagnosis" indicators (e.g., body mass index (BMI) and skinfold thickness) cannot be collected by organizations receiving food stamp education funding (SNAP-ed), the most common type of federal funding for nutrition programs.

Therefore, high-performing nutrition programs measure behavioral changes in participants, parents, and caregivers.* Some of the many behavior change indicators are:

Collecting outcome data enables organizations to know whether or not their programs are effectively improving the lives of their participants over the long term. High-performing organizations collect and analyze a wide variety of data to measure the effectiveness of their programs and the health of their organizations. Organizations use this data to build upon their successes and improve upon their weaknesses.

Indicator	Expected Outcome Rate
Percentage of participants eating three to five servings of fruit and vegetables daily by the end of the program	rate varies**
Number of participants who report sharing nutrition knowledge learned in the program with family or peers	rate varies**
Percentage of parents who feel confident choosing healthy foods in grocery stores or preparing healthy meals	rate varies**

*Exceptional programs also collect data on community-level change, such as parents' successful lobbying for more produce in a local market

**There is no average or ideal rate of change for nutrition behavior. The rates that constitute progress in these areas should involve a discussion between the organization, participants, parents, and schools (when applicable).

STEP 3 Evaluate the Organization's Health and Stability

Evaluating an organization's health and stability will provide insight into its structure, capacity, and ability to carry out its mission. It is important to consider at least two factors:

- A. Financial Sustainability**, which describes an organization's ability to conduct its work in a fiscally responsible manner
- B. Management and Governance**, which describes the leadership and oversight of the organization

A. Evaluate financial sustainability

The information below can be found on the organization's 990, an IRS form required of most nonprofits. It is best to review financial information over three to five years.

FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE

- ✓ Organization's debt-to-equity ratio is less than 1.5, meaning its debt is manageable given its assets
- ✓ Organization's current ratio is equal to or greater than one, meaning its assets are greater than its short-term debt
- ✓ Organization maintains three to six months in cash reserves so it can withstand brief financial downturns
- ✓ Funding comes from a variety of sources, including government and philanthropy; nutrition programs often receive a large portion from federal and state governments through SNAP-ed funds

FINANCIALLY UNSUSTAINABLE

- ✗ Organization's debt-to-equity ratio is greater than 1.5; substantial amount of assets are directed to paying off debt
- ✗ Current ratio is less than one; the organization will continue to accumulate short-term debt as its assets are not enough to cover its debt
- ✗ Organization maintains fewer than three months in cash reserves, leaving it susceptible to economic shocks
- ✗ Funding is dominated by one source or type of funder; if funding comes entirely from the government, programs may be very constrained because of the requirements that dictate the measurement, supplies, and program content

B. Evaluate management and governance

Management and governance indicators describe the capacity of staff and board teams to deliver on the mission, grow the organization, and hold themselves accountable.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ CEO has significant experience; management team has good working relationship; staff are actively involved in the field of nutrition, public health, and education, and have relationships with local school administration
- ✓ Board has at least seven members with diverse experience, including legal, management, financial, marketing, and fundraising, and experts on childhood obesity or nutrition (e.g., a dietitian); meets at least three times per year
- ✓ Planning shows evidence of measurable goals toward improving childhood nutrition in the community and organizational improvement

INEFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✗ Management team members lack relevant degrees or experience in the fields of nutrition, public health, and education, or may have limited leadership experience and are not involved in the community
- ✗ Board is comprised of individuals who lack diverse skills and experience; meetings are rare; and members play little or no role in fundraising, oversight, or planning
- ✗ Planning occurs ad hoc; for example, in an annual meeting where possible changes are discussed informally



Examples of EXCEPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

A 360-degree review is conducted annually on the CEO, including a review by the board

CEO is an active leader in the field

Three- to five-year plans are created with stakeholder input and tangible goals and milestones are explicitly laid out

Board includes community members, parents, and caregivers

STEP 4 Evaluate the Organization's Ability to Create Systemic Impact

There are many ways in which an organization can influence the fields of nutrition and childhood obesity prevention. Activities include conducting impact and outcome research, providing consulting and training to other programs, and publicly advocating for policies that improve nutrition for children and their communities. SIR recommends considering three categories of activities:

- A. Growth plans**, which describe the organization's plans for the next three to five years
- B. Community partnerships**, which demonstrate the organization's ability to work collaboratively
- C. Field-building activities**, which show whether the organization is influencing the field

A. Evaluate growth plans

Evaluate growth plans to understand the organization's capacity to further its mission and reach more people

- Organization has a realistic growth plan with funding and measurable goals to increase the number of children served or expand services to include families
- Organization continually seeks to find new ways to connect participants, parents, and caregivers to community resources such as farmers' markets and public gardens

B. Evaluate community partnerships

Evaluate community partnerships to understand the organization's ability to collaborate and drive greater change

- Organization involves a diverse set of community members and leaders in all stages of programming, to ensure all voices are heard
- Organization participates in community initiatives with other nutrition, physical activity, education, and governmental organizations to create a comprehensive and collaborative policy to address childhood obesity in the community

C. Evaluate field-building activities

Evaluate field-building activities to understand the organization's role in driving systemic change

- Organization understands how to create change in the lives of participants, parents, and caregivers, and designs its programs accordingly
- Organization shares lessons learned with other practitioners and local institutions such as schools by making data and research publicly available
- Organization participates in coordinated advocacy opportunities with others working to address nutrition or prevent childhood obesity; for example, collaborating with the mayor on a school nutrition improvement campaign

STEP 5 Interpret Your Evaluation and Determine How to Provide Support

The preceding four steps helped you gain a holistic understanding of an organization and its work on preventing childhood obesity through a focus on nutrition. To make a decision about the best way to provide support, determine where your organization fits among the following three categories:

- A. High-performing organizations** meet the majority of the criteria outlined above
- B. Developing organizations** meet some, but not all, of the criteria outlined above
- C. Low-performing organizations** meet few to none of the criteria outlined above

A. High-performing organizations

These organizations focus on nutrition as a way to prevent childhood obesity. They are financially sound with excellent management and governance structures. They have realistic growth plans and are engaging in field-building activities to some degree and are part of a holistic community initiative. You can feel confident that an investment in a high-performing organization will be effectively used.

Risk / Reward	Low risk / high reward
Recommended level of involvement	Low
Example investment opportunities	Continue running high-quality programs, consider including the wider community in programming, improve ability to track program impact on the community level, help bring needs and voices of program participants to state-level policy debates, train participants to become community nutrition mentors

B. Developing organizations

These organizations may be doing some things well and need improvement in other areas. Often these are young organizations, but they can also be established organizations that are undergoing a transition or are not yet fully part of a holistic community initiative. Investment in developing organizations can be challenging yet exciting for donors and funders who are interested in helping them improve.

Risk / Reward	Moderate risk / high reward
Recommended level of involvement	Medium to High
Example investment opportunities	Refine core programs to improve the quality of education, experience, or outreach components; fund expert input for curriculum and program development, and help organization deepen connections to initiatives in their community

C. Low-performing organizations

These organizations have room for improvement in all areas, and are disconnected from holistic community initiatives. Investment in a low-performing organization that has a good management team that is dedicated to improving the organization and its programs can be exciting for a donor who wants to be deeply involved in helping an organization improve. Investment in a low-performing organization that is not dedicated to improvement is not recommended.

Risk / Reward	High risk / Reward varies based on organization's desire to improve
Recommended level of involvement	High — if the organization is strategically working to improve
Example investment opportunities	Support strategic or business planning, fund community needs assessments, fund research to determine ways to improve program, secure technical assistance from high-performing organizations, hire new staff with the expertise to significantly improve the program, help connect the organization with a strong community initiative

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ShapeUp Somerville

SOMERVILLE, MA

Share Our Strength's Cooking Matters

BOSTON, MA

Supporting Emerging Social Innovations

HIGH RISK WITH THE POTENTIAL OF HIGH REWARD

Donors and funders may also wish to consider organizations that are testing innovative approaches that could eventually lead to breakthroughs in addressing targeted social issues. Such organizations should be able to articulate why they are diverging from the proven approach and how they see themselves improving upon that approach. It is becoming increasingly clear that obesity education programs must occur in conjunction with environmental and policy changes if children and their communities are to become healthier. Environmental changes include creating bike lanes and increasing access to healthy food, and policy changes include restoring physical education classes in schools. Innovative initiatives and partnerships are taking shape in communities across the country to address all the factors simultaneously. Engaging this issue provides one with the opportunity to think outside the box and engage with the environment, policies, and programs that shape how we live.

Social Impact Research (SIR) is the independent research department of Root Cause, a research and consulting firm dedicated to mobilizing the nonprofit, public, and business sectors to work together in a new social impact market. SIR aggregates, analyzes, and disseminates information to help donors and funders identify and support the most effective, efficient, and sustainable organizations working to solve social problems. Modeled after private sector equity research firms, SIR produces research reports, analyzes philanthropic portfolios, and provides educational services for advisors to help their clients make effective and rigorous philanthropic decisions.



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