

# Parent Perspectives on Nutrition and Physical Activity During Out-of-School Time

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Out-of-school time (OST) programs serve a large, diverse population of children, including those at increased obesity risk. In this study, parents' perspectives about nutrition and physical activity (PA) during OST were assessed.

**Design:** Survey.

**Setting:** Online.

**Participants:** Six hundred parents with a school-aged child participating in programs from selected OST organizations.

**Main Outcome Measures:** Parent perspectives about the importance and availability of different foods, beverages, and PA opportunities during OST, and OST program and parent involvement in promoting healthful environments.

**Analysis:** Frequencies were used to describe parents' perspectives. Wilcoxon tests and logistic regression analyses were conducted to test for significant differences.

**Results:** Most parents reported that it was important that their children have water (96.2%), fresh fruits and vegetables (79.0%), and PA (97.2%) during OST; fewer parents reported that these were regularly available. About two thirds of parents agreed that OST programs should promote healthy environments for children, whereas one third agreed that parents alone should be responsible for children's nutrition and PA.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Results suggest that many parents would support efforts to improve OST nutrition and PA. Yet, there is a need to further understand the perceptions and motivations of different subgroups to enact successful obesity prevention efforts during OST.

**Key Words:** out-of-school time, nutrition, physical activity, parents, childhood obesity (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:156-163.)

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## INTRODUCTION

Approximately one third of school-aged children in the United States (US) are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> The childhood obesity epidemic requires multilevel solutions across multiple settings. Most intervention efforts targeting children have focused on school settings.<sup>2</sup> Yet, children spend a significant amount of time out of school, and tens of millions participate in structured out-of-school time (OST) programs<sup>3</sup> on a regular basis, including

children from a range of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Broadly defined, OST programs include organized activities for children that take place before and after school and during school vacations.<sup>3</sup> These programs offer an opportunity to reach a large and diverse population of children, including those from rural and urban communities who are at increased obesity risk.<sup>4</sup>

Out-of-school time programs have been shown to improve well-being in a broad sense, demonstrating robust ef-

fects on children's social and emotional development.<sup>5</sup> There is also evidence that participation in OST programs may be protective against obesity. In a longitudinal study of underserved first-through third-graders in the northeastern US, those participating in OST programs were less likely to be obese, compared with non-participants.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, participation in organized OST activities was associated with lower obesity risk in a sample of US children aged 10-17 years, adjusting for socioeconomic factors.<sup>7</sup> A recent review also demonstrated positive, albeit limited, effects of obesity prevention programs in traditional after-school settings.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that improving food, beverage, and physical activity (PA) offerings during OST could lead to greater effects of this nature across a broader range of programs. Assessments of food, beverage, and PA environments

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indicate that current OST offerings<sup>9,10</sup> fall short of evidence-based standards,<sup>11,12</sup> which highlights opportunities for OST environments to promote healthful eating, PA, and thus obesity prevention.<sup>9,10,13-21</sup> To date, interventions designed to promote healthful eating<sup>10,22-25</sup> and increase PA<sup>22-24,26</sup> during OST have had mixed success in affecting target outcomes.

To intervene effectively in these settings, it is important to obtain the perspectives of various stakeholders. The literature lacks an assessment of parents' perspectives about nutrition and PA across OST settings. Life course theory<sup>27</sup> embeds individuals in social and historical contexts and can be used to illustrate the importance of parents' views. Two central themes of this theory are "lives and historical times" and "linked lives." The former emphasizes that historical contexts influence individuals. In this case, parents' perspectives on nutrition and PA may be influenced by current obesity-promoting environments and by the salience of childhood obesity as a public health concern. In turn, the theme of linked lives, referring to interactions among social contexts, implies that the individual is likely to influence, and to be influenced by, individuals with whom they are linked by social ties. In this case, parents are linked via social relationships with the OST programs in which their children are enrolled, and with the children themselves, highlighting that their views have implications for both. Together, these themes illustrate the importance of assessing parents' views on OST nutrition and PA; consistent with these ideas, childhood obesity interventions in other settings, such as schools, have demonstrated a greater impact with parent involvement.<sup>28</sup>

The aim of the current study was to obtain parents' perspectives about nutrition and PA during OST, in a sample of parents with a school-aged child participating in programs from at least 1 of 8 selected OST organizations. The selected organizations offer community-based programs, including enrichment (4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts) and sports programs (Pop Warner and US Youth Soccer), as well as after-school programs within the YMCA, National Council of La Raza, and National

Urban League. Parent perspectives were assessed in the following areas: how important it is that different types of foods, beverages, and PA opportunities are available during OST; how often these foods, beverages, and PA opportunities are available during OST; and OST program and parent involvement in providing healthful environments for children.

## METHODS

Participants were 600 parents with a mean age of 39 years. Parents were predominantly non-Hispanic white and well-educated (Table 1) and included both mothers (57.3%) and fathers.

Because this study entailed completion by adults ( $\geq 18$  years of age) of an online survey that was minimal risk, the Tufts University Institutional Review Board deemed it exempt (45 CFR 46.101 b, Category 2) and so collection of informed consent was not required. Participants could choose whether to participate and could stop participation at any time.

Researchers from Tufts University commissioned KRC Research (Wash-

ington, DC), a global market research firm, to conduct a 38-question online survey designed to investigate parents' perspectives about foods, beverages, and PA opportunities available to their children while participating in OST programs. A team of nutrition experts developed the survey, aiming to generate questions that were appropriate across OST organizations, with minimal social desirability and no technical nutrition terminology. Participants were recruited by KRC Research via a third-party vendor, Survey Sampling International (Shelton, CT), which distributed invitations to respondents from a general panel of parents and a panel of Hispanic parents, all of whom had volunteered for online surveys and polls. Invitations were targeted to those with children ages 5–12 years. The resulting percentage of Hispanic participants in the final sample was similar to the US population (17% Hispanic/Latino<sup>29</sup>).

To be eligible for survey completion, parents had to live in the US, be  $\geq 18$  years of age, and have a 5- to 12-year-old child enrolled in at least 1 of 8 selected OST organizations: Boy Scouts of America, Girl

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Parents Surveyed

Demographics	Frequency or Mean $\pm$ SD
Sex	57.3% female
Age	Mean = 39 y (SD = 9.4)
Ethnicity	81.9% non-Hispanic (n = 597)
Race	84.2% white (n = 596)
Education level	76.1% some college or higher (n = 598)
Annual household income	66.3% $\geq$ \$50,000 (n = 588)
Location	30.6% city, 44.7% suburb, 15.4% small town, 9.4% rural (n = 598)
Parents surveyed with a 5- to 12-y-old child enrolled in each organization (%)	
Soccer	32
YMCA	26
Girl Scouts	26
Boy Scouts	25
Pop Warner Youth Football	14
4-H	12
Pop Warner Youth Cheerleading	8
National Council of La Raza	4
National Urban League	4

Note: n = 600 unless otherwise indicated. There were small amounts of missing data for some of the demographic variables.

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