

## Nurturing Positive Behaviors through Healthy Initiatives

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*Ohio Healthy Programs provides the pieces to build a foundation in children that promotes healthy eating behaviors.*

In 2011-2014, more than one-third of adults (36%), or about 84 million people, were obese (BMI  $\geq 30$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>). About one in six youths (17%) aged 2 to 19 years were obese (BMI  $\geq 95^{\text{th}}$  percentile). Even more significant, 7 of the top 10 causes of death in 2014 were chronic diseases. Two of these chronic diseases—heart disease and cancer—together accounted for nearly 46% of all deaths. These numbers are not only staggering but most importantly, they are preventable [1].

Many cases of obesity and chronic diseases are linked to lifestyle choices such as poor diet and limited physical activity [2]. Many individuals suffering from food insecurity lack the tools and education necessary to make healthy decisions in regards to meal planning. As a result, low economic and poverty-stricken areas are disproportionately impacted. Lack of nutrition education causes nutrition labels to be misread, and it enables misleading advertisements within the food industry to wield too much influence on people's perception of eating healthy. For example, FDA researchers recently found that many individuals were misinterpreting food labels and serving sizes leading to an increase of caloric, fat, sodium intake [3]. The World Health Organization became so concerned about advertising they have since endorsed a set of recommendations that reduce children's exposure to advertisements that promote unhealthy foods concentrated in fat, sodium and sugar [4]. Without proper nutrition education, many people find healthy eating to be time consuming and confusing.

In life, we face challenges that inspire us to take action and create change that leaves an impact. For those in the field of public health, the inspiration stems in no small part from the pervasiveness and impact of obesity and chronic diseases. When living in the richest country in the world and seeing statistics of this magnitude, we know more must be done to solve this issue. Child care providers are on the front lines of this issue and can become that beacon of light producing an environment where healthy eating behaviors become the norm. Many providers are searching for programs that can help strengthen their knowledge of healthy eating. They understand the impact of incorporating the information they gain, and taking steps to ensure their children receive the tools they need to live a healthier life.

Through education, mentorship, and policy initiatives, Ohio Healthy Programs works with child care providers to embrace an environment that is focused on healthy eating behaviors and the promotion of physical activity. This program sets off to accomplish this goal by developing an interactive curriculum that demonstrates simple, cost effective and healthy alternatives to daily practices. The program is comprised of the following four key components:

1. Module-Based Learning
2. In-Home Technical Assistant (TA) Meetings
3. Policy & Strategy Implementation
4. Certification

Providers are able to take online courses that are geared toward enhancing their knowledge while creating realistic opportunities to implement new healthy strategies. The modules cover a breadth of topics from healthy meal planning, healthy snack combinations, increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, introduction of whole grain servings, and emphasis on water consumption. After completion of the modules, the Child Care providers receive, three personalized in-home meetings with their assigned technical assistant (TA). The TA reviews guidelines that help elevate a provider's menu and to help find easy modifications that are in line with the healthier guidelines. This might include limiting fried food options to once a week or a reduction in juice consumption. Gardening options and physical activity ideas are also discussed and reviewed.

Norma Patterson opened her daycare facility 18 years ago with an emphasis on creating an environment that is safe and welcoming. Norma understands the difficult decision many parents and single mothers make when deciding where to place their child while away at work.

When describing her day care facility, Norma passionately stated, "I wanted to offer a Haven. I wanted to offer mothers a safe place for their children that are similar to the standards at home. Mothers are looking for a place where their child will receive the nurturing and love that they would give their child. And that is why I named my daycare facility a "Haven of Love"". Norma's daycare offers a premium in nurturing positive behaviors through the children she cares for, along with their busy mothers.

Increasing rates of childhood obesity and a lack of access to nutrition education inspired Norma to learn more about current healthy guidelines.

"I wanted more than what I was doing," she explained. "I wanted to reaffirm what I knew, have a change in mindset and help make this a change in life, in a healthy way... Whatever my children eat, I will eat. I want to lead by example."

Norma understood that as part of keeping her children safe, she must also protect against outside forces that generate unhealthy eating behaviors. Given her conviction, Norma was actively searching for programs that could help improve her menus and teach healthy alternatives to her current practices. When she came across Ohio Healthy Programs, Norma was elated to know she could increase her knowledge of the topic.

"I wanted to take advantage of staying up to date with the recommendations with the state," she said. Norma sought out ways to improve her daycare and has become a strong advocate for healthy eating behaviors and promotion of physical activity.

Lack of knowledge and limited resources are often critical missing pieces to building a foundation for promoting healthy eating. Norma noted that prior to enrolling in Ohio Healthy Programs she had never come across consistent guidelines on ways to implement healthy eating strategies. Many guidelines that she was aware of were not concrete, and they were only given to her in passing. Food labels had become a confusing road map to meal planning, leaving Norma without a clear understanding of how she could do better. She was relying heavily on misleading advertisements and product promotions to inform her how she could meet fruit and vegetable intake recommendations.

Ohio Healthy Programs became an instrumental tool in creating the awareness Norma needed to address the negative behaviors present in her daycare.

“You know you have heard this information before, and then when you are presented with more information, it caused me to stop and wonder,” Norma said. “It never really registered how bad these foods are, even though they are quick and convenient. I thought ‘how bad could they be?’ But then I learned they are *THAT BAD*, and I have stopped buying those corn dogs and hot dogs.”

The program has allowed for Norma to develop the framework she needed to address unhealthy eating habits and not enough physical activity in her daycare. Prior to enrollment, sugary beverages, fried and processed foods were all staple menu options. To further compound these factors, three of her children suffer from childhood obesity. Despite parents’ concerns for their child’s health, many negative eating behaviors stem from practices at home. Norma’s children were coming into her daycare daily with handfuls of chips and soda. Norma knew that something must be done to ensure her children are nurtured in a way that prevents them from chronic health conditions.

Since enrolling, Norma has moved with lightning speed to implement the menu guidelines, strategies and policies that are the foundation to Ohio Healthy Programs. Regarding sugary beverage options, Norma honestly admitted, “I knew they didn’t have much nutritious value to them at all but were used during quiet down moments and snacks.”

Since understanding the impact that beverage choices have on weight, Norma no longer allows her children to have sugary drinks; juice has been swapped out for whole fruit servings. Water is now the first drink of choice in her daycare.

Menu selection also has been a major improvement from old practices. Norma has completely discontinued purchasing higher calories snack foods, such as chips, and has been slowly reducing fried, processed foods in her home. Her ultimate goal is to completely remove these foods from her menus. During the in-home TA meetings, she was given the knowledge on how to make easy, simple changes to improve the quality of her menus.

“I was offered up information on how to tweak menus to meet recommendations so that my kids were receiving healthy meals,” she explained. “Mark [the TA] provided healthy alternatives on ways to eat healthy, which was very impactful and made such a difference and all at the right time.”

Fruit and vegetables have taken center stage at her family meal times and whole grains have been introduced to help balance out her meals. Norma noted that her children have slowly begun to adapt to the new changes. She has been a strong advocate for helping them to understand why these foods are healthy. She is often opening communication lines while explaining, “A meat, bread, fruit and vegetables all have a place on the plate and play an important part. You cannot eat just meat and bread but need to complete your meal with healthier items such as fruit and vegetables.”

Healthy eating practices are essential in fighting childhood obesity, but children must also understand the importance of physical activity. After enrolling in the program, physical activity has taken on a whole new meaning in Norma’s daycare. Prior to the program, Norma explained that her children rarely expressed interest in playing outside and would prefer to play on a tablet or watch TV.

Screen time became so abundant in their homes that it would carry over to daycare.

“If they would be allowed, the kids would be on that thing from the time they come here until the time they leave,” Norma said. She has since implemented a “No tablet or TV” policy in her daycare.

To help her efforts in increasing physical activity, Norma takes her children for walks on the path behind her home. She has introduced various games to help the children play outside and to enhance their imaginations. This change has also encouraged Norma to become more active and play with the kids.

“I believe I’m moving in the right direction, not just for my kids but myself and my daycare,” she said. Small and steady steps in the right direction can lead to the positive impacts of healthy living.

Norma has seen parent engagement as a critical piece to enforcing her healthy policies. Many of her families are from hard working, single parent homes. Understanding the plight that these mothers face, she realizes that she must create an environment that inspires enthusiasm among the children while equipping parents with the right tools to help enforce the guidelines at home. Oftentimes, parents can be the weak link in creating positive change. She stated that many of her parents have never had education or training on healthy eating. When she first began implementing her new policies, she realized parents were not aware of the reasons for the changes. She noticed that parents would appear to abide by her new policies, but when she wasn’t watching, they provided their kids with junk food or fast food. Some parents have their children eat these items in the car before entering or leaving her home.

Norma has been a strong advocate of open communication and sharing what she has learned through the class directly with each of her parents. She addresses the concerns of harmful habits like regular fast food intake. She has explained how these foods can impact overall health and weight status, especially in regards to the children suffering from obesity. To illustrate her point, she plans to post several posters where her parents can read and learn simple “tricks” to eat healthy and healthy snacks.

Norma has been a guiding light, not only to the children she cares for but also the community she serves. Norma is highly active in her local church, and she knew the impact she could make with the education and training she has received. Knowing her community lacked the education and tools necessary to create a healthy eating environment, Norma jumped at the first chance to help implement new polices to educate more children. Norma hung the “Water First for Thirst” poster in her classroom to educate the little ones she teaches in Sunday school.

The poster has been well received and Norma recently conducted a meeting where she plans to lead a task force to make more posters and display them in the information center and classrooms in her church. Norma is a breathing testimony of her mission to create an environment that provides love, education and support to those who need it most.

Norma has nothing but positive memories from her experience through Ohio Healthy Programs. When talking of her goals and possibility of reenrollment, Norma did not hesitate stating, “I will definitely be enrolling next year. In fact I have told other providers they should sign up for these classes.

Norma found Ohio Healthy Program’s modules to be very accommodating. They enlightened her and taught her how to implement the policies and procedures she desired. She found Ohio Healthy Programs to be a vital tool for any home daycare provider, especially if they want to upgrade their program to be healthier.

“This program, I enjoyed,” she said. “It made a serious impact on how I care for children and how their health helps keep them safe. I feel so blessed and when Mark [the TA] came he was putting his all and all into his work. He went over my menu and made simple easy suggestions that did not seem too difficult to implement. And to have him there made a huge impact on me. His passion was very evident and it made me more passionate.”

Fostering positive behaviors through healthy initiatives can have a lasting influence on the community around us. Norma’s love for education and nurturing spirit is a light that is vibrant and reaches throughout her community. Norma’s story is a shining example of Children’s Hunger Alliance’s mission, striving to ensure that every child without access receives healthy food, nutrition education and physical activity. Ohio Healthy Programs provides the pieces that are essential to building a foundation that will last a lifetime. In addition, cultivating positive behaviors at a young age inspires children to continue what they learned throughout their lives.

## References

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