



History of the Healthy Kids Collaborative

The Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) believes that all children and their families can reach their full potential when surrounded by a united and supportive community. Founded in 1993, DEPC is dedicated to building a strong foundation for children and families by advocating and supporting both high quality early care and education and a coordinated system of community resources. DEPC prioritizes service for children from birth to age eight and facilitates collaborative planning with diverse stakeholders to develop strategies and allocate resources to launch every child as a healthy, lifelong learner by the end of third grade.

In 2008, with support from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) began working with a design team and local community leaders to identify strategies and create a plan to support the healthy development of children from birth to age 8. Through these collaborations, the decision was made to undertake a new project called the Healthy Kids Collaborative (HKC) which would focus on reducing the BMI of low income children between the ages of two and four in Nash and Edgecombe counties. The purpose of the HKC was threefold: to help individual organizations and agencies in the two counties identify and implement small shifts that influence the desired impact; to connect organizations and agencies to achieve greater impact by working together; and to launch and support new initiatives requiring multiple partners for success. The HKC identified six enabling conditions essential to achieving the desired impact:

- Parents/guardians must value nutrition and physical activity.
- Child care providers must offer healthy food and options for physical activity.
- Medical providers must talk about the importance of a healthy diet and physical activity.
- Families must be able to conveniently access safe and affordable places designed for age-appropriate physical activity.
- Healthy food must be both affordable and accessible.
- The entire community must value physical activity and healthy eating habits.

Over the following year, DEPC began building the collaborative. A small group quickly grew to over 50 interested stakeholders attending community planning meetings and developing low-cost and no cost strategies to improve health outcomes for children. Strategies included recruiting local organizations and churches to adopt healthy food policies, providing Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, and creating "Days of Play." Additional grant money provided the opportunity to expand the NAP SACC Program (Nutritional And Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care), implement outdoor play groups, and develop and implement a social marketing campaign to encourage conversations between medical providers and families about healthy weight. Through this work, HKC realized that providing only programmatic components was not sufficient; policy and environmental changes needed to be a priority.

HKC applied for and received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, ConAgra Foods, and Blue Cross Blue Shield to work toward imple-

menting policy changes in the two-county region to increase access to healthy foods and safe places to play. Strategies included opening a farmers' market at a local child care center, working with county and municipal government to develop updated policies on community gardens, and facilitating changes in the way people think about parks, not only what is on them but who takes care of them and who can use them. With support of HKC, the City of Rocky Mount Parks and Recreation Department established a Park Watch Program. Funding from PNC Bank and Blue Cross Blue Shield is currently transforming the DEPC playground into a model outdoor learning environment that can showcase best practice for child care providers and schools. An important part of this process was allowing public access to the formerly private DEPC outdoor space, providing a needed resource for physical activity to a low-income Rocky Mount community and modeling health promoting policy. HKC then began working with Edgecombe County Government and Edgecombe County Public Schools to facilitate discussions on developing a joint use agreement that would allow public access to elementary school playgrounds with funding support from the CDC's Community Transformation Project.

The next phase of HKC will focus on using joint use and shared use as strategies to improve access to places for physical activity in communities surrounding elementary schools. HKC has been successful in reaching many communities throughout the two counties with education about the benefits of adequate physical activity and healthy nutrition; however, many families still are not able to be physically active because there is limited access to safe, easily-accessible places to play. A joint use agreement is currently being negotiated between Edgecombe County Public Schools and Edgecombe County government. As well, Nash Rocky Mount Schools is looking at policy to open school playgrounds after school hours. Families living in communities surrounding these schools will soon have a place to be physically active. HKC will prioritize building community capacity to support and increase utilization of the shared spaces and offer an optimal package of services, both health and educational, to launch children as healthy, lifelong learners. Layering health programming in these improved built environments will lead to improved nutrition and increased ability to pursue physical activity opportunities for all community members, leading to increased health outcomes for children and their families.

As school outdoor play spaces become available to the public, improvements will be made to transform the playgrounds into outdoor learning environments. Outdoor learning environments will provide spaces for children and families to be physically active and learn. Through the Ready Schools Initiative, schools will build their capacity to use outdoor learning environments during instructional time to promote Common Core Curriculum standards and increase physical activity levels of students. Ready Schools will also incorporate outdoor learning environments into community and family engagement strategies such as kindergarten transition activities.

For more information, please visit our website, www.depc.org, find us on Facebook or call Emily Watson, Healthy Kids Coordinator, at 252-985-4300 to learn how you can get involved!