The global prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity continues to rise. Obesity is often caused by poor diet, and many children live in obesogenic environments that encourage the consumption of energy-dense foods.

Schools can be a key setting in the fight against obesity. Most European children spend a significant amount of time at school and consume a large quantity of their daily calories there.

School food environments include cafeteria and vending machines, as well as fast-food restaurants and supermarkets in the direct vicinity of schools.

Overall findings
The study found a significant association between school food environment interventions and a reduction in Body Mass Index (BMI).

It also showed that schools can improve the healthfulness of food environments without economical losses.

Providing clear and precise dietary guidelines that increase the quality and nutritional value of school meals offers a good starting point.

What works to improve school food environments?
Especially promising is a strategic mix of interventions that:
• Are based on scientific evidence
• Increase the availability of fruit and vegetables
• Provide healthy meals with high palatability and attractive presentation
• Restrict or ban vending machines and soft drinks
• Promote collaboration, training and education of school chefs and staff, parents and children according to local needs

What undermines healthy school food environments?
Findings from the review include:
• Some school programmes are not based on scientific evidence
• There is ongoing provision of foods that contain elevated amounts of sugars (e.g. juices and boxed cereals)
• There is persistent provision of ultra-processed and highly caloric foods in schools
• The surrounding school food environment has a great impact on children's food choices and can negatively affect the benefits of healthy food environments within schools

The role of government
Policy actions are needed to improve school food environments. Regions with strong regulatory policies on food and beverages have shown improved BMI and dietary outcomes compared to regions without regulatory policies.

To ensure long lasting impact it is crucial that governments are involved in the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of food environmental regulatory policies within and around schools.
Improving school food environments to prevent childhood obesity

Healthier school meal standards

- High palatability
- Attractive presentation
- Increase fruit and vegetable accessibility
- Replace sugar-sweetened beverages, including juices, with water
- Replace refined carbohydrates with unrefined whole grains

Changes in school food environments can improve children's diets and BMI, but regulatory policies are needed for lasting change.

Involvement of

Parents, school staff, students, chefs, policy makers needed to ensure maximum acceptability, adaptability and sustainability.

STOP (Science and Technology in childhood Obesity Policy) stopchildobesity.eu/

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