Reducing obesity in early childhood: results from Romp & Chomp, an Australian community-wide intervention program

In Victoria, Australia the community-wide intervention Romp & Chomp was established to reduce obesity and promote healthy eating and active play in children from 0 to 5 years of age. The multi-setting, multi-strategy intervention in the city of Geelong took place from 2004 to 2008 and used community capacity building and environmental changes to “increase healthy eating and active play in early-childhood care and educational settings”. Children were the target audience because childhood obesity often tracks into adulthood, and therefore building healthy behaviours from a young age is seen as the best way to avoid the development of obesity.

The Romp & Chomp project had eight objectives: “1) to increase the capacity of relevant [community] ... organisations to promote healthy eating and active play; 2) to increase the awareness of the project’s key messages in homes and early-childhood settings; 3) to evaluate the process, impact, and outcomes of the project; 4) to significantly decrease consumption of high sugar drinks and promote consumption of water and milk; 5) to significantly decrease consumption of energy-dense snacks and increase consumption of fruit and vegetables; 6) to significantly increase active play at home and decrease television (TV) viewing time; 7) to increase structured active play in kindergarten and child care settings; and 8) to achieve an integrated population growth monitoring program within the department of Maternal and Child Health Service.” The majority of these objectives targeted behaviours that correlate to possible unhealthy behaviours and the development of obesity.

At the end of the intervention, there was “a reduction in the prevalence of overweight/obesity that is 3 and 5 times more ... than in the comparison sample”. Children’s diets also saw improvements; this can be associated with the directed health messages made by the program. Reductions in the consumption of high sugar drinks and energy-dense foods were also seen, as well as increases in the amount of fruit, vegetables, and water consumed by the children. The bodily and behavioural changes seen in this study are believed to be the result of “the changes in children’s environments” in the intervention. Of note, the consistency and reinforcement of the healthy eating messages were a key part of its success.