

2008 Contemporary Social Issues Seminar Series
Sponsored by the Universities at Shady Grove and the Rockville Institute

Preventing Childhood Obesity

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

The Issue

Why is childhood obesity growing and how can it be prevented?

What We Know

Since the 1970s, the prevalence of obesity has exploded for children:

- More than doubled for 2- to 5-year-olds (from 5% to over 10%),
- More than tripled for 6- to 11-year-olds (from 4% to over 15%), and
- More than doubled for 12- to 19-year-olds (from 6% to over 15%).

These trends signal high risks for chronic diseases related to poor eating and inactivity. For example, a child born in the year 2000 faces an average 30% to 40% risk of developing Type II diabetes in his or her lifetime.

As environments have evolved in ways that provide less opportunity to be active and fewer choices for healthy eating, children and residents from low income and communities of color have been particularly affected.

Approaches to Prevention

Traditional approaches to combat this health crisis have typically involved individual education and community messaging. However, it is increasingly recognized, as noted in a recent report by the Institute of Medicine, *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, that individual behavior change strategies alone are no longer sufficient. The significant changes in children's social and physical environments – from ubiquitous advertising of junk foods to lack of easy and safe access to physical activity opportunities – make it increasingly difficult for children to engage in healthy eating and physical activity.

In response to this data, there is a growing movement around the country to change day care, school, after school, workplace, and neighborhood environments to better support healthy eating and active lifestyles. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been at the forefront of this movement. The Foundation, in particular, has a three-pronged approach:

- Develop evidence through rigorous research and evaluation on effective programs and policies for improving physical active and nutritious eating.
- Work with communities and others in building partnerships and coalitions to address the problem in the schools and other venues.

- Develop advocacy to generate support for environmental changes.

Goals for the Presentation

This panel discussion will provide the following:

- What is known about childhood obesity,
- What changes have taken place over the last 30 years that have contributed to the epidemic,
- What is being done in the public and private sectors to address this problem, and
- What has been effective in influencing practice and policy.

Presenters

- **Laura Leviton, PhD, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.** Dr. Leviton has overseen evaluations in most of the areas of focus for the Foundation and now works primarily on Foundation initiatives in preventing childhood obesity and in serving vulnerable populations. Before joining the Foundation in July 1999, she was a professor of public health at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and before that, on the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health.

Dr. Leviton is a leading writer on evaluation methods and practice, in particular for disease prevention. She was president of the American Evaluation Association in 2000. She is the co-author of a leading evaluation text and serves on several editorial boards for evaluation journals. For her work in HIV prevention and worksite health promotion, Dr. Leviton received the 1993 award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest from the American Psychological Association.

- **Debra J. Rog, PhD, Vice President, Rockville Institute.** Dr. Rog has over 25 years experience in a range of evaluation and applied research studies. Recently, she led a series of pilot evaluability assessments of childhood obesity prevention projects for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This project included synthesizing information from across the diverse sites to produce a summary report for the Foundation. Dr. Rog has been elected the 2009 President of the American Evaluation Association. She will serve a 3-year term, starting as President-elect in 2008.