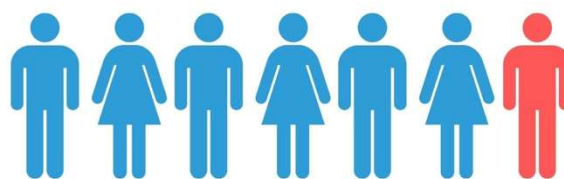


# The Utah Department of Health Finds Positive Outcomes in Early Childhood Education Program

Too many individuals, adults and children alike, are overweight or obese. Obesity in childhood is particularly troublesome as it dramatically increases the risk of obesity in adulthood. Young children who are obese may experience conditions such as high cholesterol and high blood sugar even before they reach adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Early Childhood and Education centers (ECEs) are ideal settings for children to learn good health habits linked to obesity prevention. About three-fourths of children in the U.S. spend an average of 35 hours per week in child care.<sup>2</sup>



**One in seven preschoolers is obese**

**Public Health Challenge.** Nationally about one in seven (13.9%) children of preschool age is obese.<sup>3</sup> The rate for Utah is only half that rate (7%), but it is still unacceptably high.<sup>4</sup> ECEs have opportunities to set the stage and help children learn healthy behaviors that can extend into adulthood. However, it can be difficult for ECEs to dedicate staff time and resources to changing practices and creating new policies that can guide the adoption of children’s healthy behaviors.

**Approach.** The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) explored ways to help ECEs develop obesity prevention programs. The federally recognized Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) program, developed by the University of North Carolina, is an effective program but was cost-prohibitive for some ECEs. In its earliest stages, NAP SACC did not include breastfeeding as a healthy nutrition practice.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, UDOH laid out an alternate plan using a home-grown platform now known as Teaching Obesity Prevention in Child Care Settings (TOP Star). TOP Star is based on NAP SACC but is offered to all Utah ECEs free of charge and addresses breastfeeding. TOP Star training includes six online modules covering nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding. The training has been approved for six hours of continuing education credit by the Office of Child Care and Utah Registry for Professional Development. Hours count as professional development hours for Child Development Associate, Licensing Requirement, or Career Ladder, as well as the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). UDOH contracted with the local health departments to reach out to ECEs within their health district boundaries and encourage them to apply for endorsement. Ten of the state’s 13 local health departments are actively recruiting ECEs for TOP Star endorsement. Local health department staff are trained as consultants and provide training and resources to all ECEs interested in endorsement. Endorsement requires an assessment, goal setting, staff training, and policy development. Centers can earn up to five “stars” based on the number of policies and practices recorded in the assessment. In order to ensure that policies and practices are maintained, endorsement must be renewed every three years. Re-endorsement requires a new action plan and renewed staff training.

One provider at a large ECE stated, “Our teachers are eating healthier with the children. We have also included more visuals and books in the classroom as well as more resources for parents.”



**Results.** Currently 128 facilities, representing more than 7,500 children, have a TOP Star endorsement. The TOP Star program has received recognition by other state agencies. TOP Star endorsement earns ECEs points as well as access to many benefits such as a professional monthly newsletter, lesson plans, posters, professional graphic art, or social media ads.

**Sustaining success.** There are about 150 Head Start and Early Head Start programs in Utah.<sup>6</sup> Because Head Start centers already have nutrition and physical activity policies in place, UDOH is simplifying the process for them to receive TOP Star endorsement. UDOH met with the Utah Head Start Association to create a crosswalk and identify overlap in training curricula between the two childcare models. Gaps in the Head Start training curriculum (e.g., breastfeeding) that are necessary for a TOP Star endorsement were identified and a special training course was developed strictly for Head Start staff. This program is currently in the process of being rolled out. Engaging Head Start in TOP Star will help to grow and sustain the program.

Despite positive feedback from ECEs, the re-endorsement rate was lower than expected. In 2020, there were 33 newly endorsed ECE facilities, but 14 TOP Star facilities either closed or did not renew. Anecdotal information suggested the time required for training can be a barrier. TOP Star has now put all trainings online to make it easier for staff to complete the training as their time permits. This online training has proven to be extremely popular. In Fiscal Year 2020, 535 providers participated in the training.

In a survey of TOP Star providers in Salt Lake County, 47.3% of respondents said the endorsement process was somewhat or very easy.<sup>8</sup>

UDOH partnered with a research class at the University of Utah to identify factors that were most important in the decision to endorse or re-endorse among 30 TOP Star providers.<sup>7</sup> Center-based providers said QRIS points and the complexity of the endorsement process were important factors. Home-based providers said the ability to market the TOP Star program mattered most. UDOH is working to optimize marketing and to further streamline the endorsement process.

For more information:

Go to <http://choosehealth.utah.gov/prek-12/childcare/top-star-program.php>

Contact Judy Harris 801-538-6603 or [judyharris@utah.gov](mailto:judyharris@utah.gov) UDOH EPICC Program

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Childhood Obesity Facts. Prevalence of Childhood Obesity in the United States. Downloaded August 7, 2021. Available online at <https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/division-information/media-tools/dpk/vs-childhood-obesity/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. Preventing Childhood Obesity in Early Care and Education: Selected Standards from Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition; 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Childhood Obesity Facts 2019 .Prevalence of Childhood Obesity in the United States. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

<sup>4</sup> Utah WIC Data for children aged 2 to 5. Email correspondence. Danielle Cordon August 6, 2020

<sup>5</sup> Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) program developed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a federally recognized evidence-based federally recognized

<sup>6</sup> Directory of Head Start Program Service Areas and Sites. 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Chapman D, Hansen E, Peterson L, Stafford J, Stahell J, Thoman-Black S. University of Utah. Utah's TOP Star 2020 Program Evaluation.

<sup>8</sup> TOP Star Survey. (Raw Data). Salt Lake County, UT 2020.