



Health Position Statement Focusing on

Healthy Weight, Nutrition, and Physical Activity

As an organization that collectively reaches more than 40 million young people, the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY) plays a leadership role in engaging young people and the adults who work with them in activities that provide support and opportunities for a range of youth outcomes – vocational readiness, social and emotional health, physical health, civic engagement and educational attainment. As a piece of this work the NCY promotes physical and mental health through a positive youth development approach.

Research has shown that participating in youth development focused programs can positively influence young people's development.¹ A youth development approach includes creating positive supportive learning environments, interactions with positive adults, and having opportunities to become actively engaged in skill development and decision-making processes. The youth development approach underscores the need to engage youth in considering the array of health issues that may affect their lives, and designing relevant supports and intervention.

The National Collaboration for Youth is concerned with all aspects of young people's health. Given the increasing focus on childhood obesity, nutrition, and physical activity, it is particularly important for our organizations to address these issues. The National Collaboration for Youth recommends that each youth organization find ways to attend to youth health and wellness issues such as these within their own program initiatives and structures.

Approximately 9 million children over age 6 are obese.² Although the federal 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* stress the importance of a balanced diet and recommend at least 60 minutes of physical activity for children on most, preferably all, days of the week, studies show that students are increasingly less likely to get adequate exercise and eat in a healthy way. The CDC reports that 61.9 percent of children ages nine to 13 do not participate in any organized physical activity outside of school hours.³

In a separate study, the CDC found that less than ten percent of elementary, junior high, middle, and high schools provided daily physical education or an equivalent at the time of the study.⁴ Less than half of schools offered any out-of-school time intramural

activities or physical activity clubs for students. According to data from the CDC's 2003 *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance*, almost 80% of young people do not eat the recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables.⁵

Since young people spend significant time outside of the school and home, contexts such as youth-serving organizations, extracurricular activities and school and community-based after-school programs are important places for them to develop knowledge and skills to keep themselves and their peers physically and mentally healthy. The National Collaboration for Youth believes that:

- Young people can be powerful messengers when it comes to influencing their peers, and powerful agents of change in their communities. Through service-learning experiences, action research projects, and community organizing strategies related to nutrition and physical activity, young people can be active partners in educating themselves, their peers and their families and in advocating for environmental and policy changes that would lead to healthier lifestyles.
- Good health practices, including healthy habits^a, preventive care^b and refraining from health compromising behavior^c are essential to youth development and these practices contribute to an overall sense of well-being.
- Youth benefit from health-promoting strategies that reflect what is known about development. For example, strategies should involve opportunities for positive relationships with peers and other adults, creative skill-building, and opportunities for young people to create positive change in their neighborhoods and communities.
- Youth Development happens within the context of the family, schools and community, therefore, active engagement of all stakeholders is critical in designing strategies leading to long term changes and the development of healthy habits. Research has shown that effective interventions focus not only on individual youth, but also family and community.
- Research-based curricula that address health promotion and have been shown to be effective for youth can be incorporated into community programs.
- Health promotion skills and habits can be taught with a view to developing a healthy lifestyle that can be maintained throughout one's life.

a. *Healthy habits*: participates in regular, daily physical activity, eats a nutritionally sound diet; maintains healthy weight; receives adequate sleep.

b. *Preventive care*: e.g., self exams, dental care, stress relief strategies, regular check-ups, maintenance of medications (if conditions require), safety belt, lifejacket or helmet use as appropriate

c. Refrains from *health compromising behaviors* (such as does not use tobacco products, alcohol or other drugs; does not participate in violence or crime related activities; drive or ride with an impaired driver.

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman (Eds.), Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Available at: www.nap.edu/catalog/10022.html

² Koplan, Jeffrey P., Catharyn T. Liverman, and Vivica A. Kraak, Editors, Committee on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth, *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health In The Balance*, Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, National Academies Press, Washington, D.C. (September 2004).

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2003). Physical activity levels among children aged 9-13 years – United States, 2002. *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report*, 52(33), 785-788.

⁴ National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2000). Fact Sheet: Physical Education and Activity. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/shpps>

⁵ Grunbaum, J.A., Kann L., Kinchen, S., Ross, J., Hawkins, J., Jowry, R., et al. (2004) Youth risk behavior surveillance: United States, 2003. *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report*, 53(SS-2), 1-95.