

Obesity Prevention success stories

Association
of State
Public Health
Nutritionists

Patrice Isabella, MS, RD, CLE

Utah's TOP Star Program: Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity at Early Care and Education Centers

At the Utah Department of Health, Patrice Isabella knows how to take a start-up grant and make a big difference. The Utah TOP Star program got its start in 2011 with a two-year \$250,000 grant through CDC's Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) program. Now, TOP Star is improving nutrition and physical activity at child care centers all around Utah.

TOP Star is Targeting Obesity in Preschool (TOP) and Child Care Settings. The program works with child care providers to improve nutrition and physical activity at their centers. Patrice, Utah's Nutrition Coordinator, drew from the evidence-based Nutrition and Physical Activity Self Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) Program to develop Utah's program. She added an infant and toddler component and incorporated breastfeeding support and other best practices for infants and toddlers.

To launch the program, Patrice brought together partners around the state who have an investment in improving nutrition and physical activity in early childhood settings. Staff from Utah's Child Care Licensing Program in the Department of Health, the Office of Child Care in the Department of Workforce Services, the Child and Adult Care Food Program in the Office of Education, the Utah Head Start Association, local health departments, and the Utah Association for the Education of Young Children joined together to serve as the project's advisory committee. This new Child Care Obesity Prevention Workgroup piloted TOP Star with three local health departments. Now, three years later, every local health department in Utah has joined in.

Here's how TOP Star works: Patrice trains local health education specialists as TOP Star consultants. To date, Patrice has trained sixteen consultants. The consultants then contact child care providers and encourage them to enroll in the program. Providers complete a self-assessment of their physical activity and nutrition environments and policies, and then the consultants work with the providers one-on-one to set goals and to develop an action plan for increasing physical activity and improving nutrition. The consultant gives the providers the TOP Star toolkit, with many resources and a wealth of information.



Pictured: Patrice Isabella, MS, RD, CLE

About Patrice

Patrice is Nutrition Coordinator with the Utah Health Department and Program Coordinator for the Department's Healthy Living Through Environment, Policy and Improved Clinical Care (EPICC) Program. Before she became nutrition coordinator in 2006, Patrice was the state's 5 A Day Coordinator. Before that, she worked with the WIC's Children with Special Health Care Needs Program.

Patrice is an avid hiker and a dedicated swimmer. She also loves to "putter around in the dirt" at various garden plots.

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Providers also receive credits for attending training workshops on a variety of topics, from Childhood Obesity and Healthy Eating, to Physical Activity, Working with Families, Personal Health and Breastfeeding. TOP Star offers these workshops both online and in person. Once the child care providers have completed their action plan, they take another self-assessment. Providers who demonstrate improvement receive recognition on the TOP Star website and a certificate of endorsement from their local health department.

Once the CPPW grant period ended, the program continued with a CDC Preventive Health Block Grant. Now, TOP Star is in its second year of a CDC obesity prevention grant that will go through mid-2018.

Successes and Major Outcomes

Patrice cites the partners who came together to form the Child Care Obesity Prevention Workgroup as a great success. Bringing together this diverse group expanded the program's reach. Staff in these agencies and organizations worked quite separately before they joined forces for this program. Having all these partners at the same table is making a huge difference in incorporating obesity prevention into many of the state's child care programs.

Another success of the program is the number of child care providers who are now trained and actively improving the nutrition and physical activity environments at their centers. More than fifty providers now have certificates of endorsement, and more are working through the program now.

Debbie Reid with Ready, Set, Grow Childcare and Preschool made many improvements at her facility through her involvement in TOP Star. She said, "Before enrolling in TOP Star, I didn't know how to improve the nutrition and physical activity environment in my home and with the children under my care. I wouldn't have made it a priority had I not gotten involved with TOP Star. Now I know where to go to get information and assistance."

Findings and Lessons Learned

Patrice says that adapting an existing product, the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) tool, made it possible for her team to get the TOP Star Program up and running quickly.

With the initial CPPW grant, the program included incentives for providers, including money to make TOP Star-related improvements such as purchasing playground equipment. These financial incentives were a great draw



TOP Star helps child care providers improve their nutrition and physical activity environments by focusing on four key areas: nutrition, physical activity, screen time, and breastfeeding.

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***– Debbie Reid
Ready, Set, Grow
Childcare and Preschool***

for providers. The program's professional development credit is also an important incentive for providers.

Through the CPPW grant, Patrice brought on a Healthy Child Care Coordinator. This half-time person played a key role in implementing the program.

Challenges

The biggest challenge, Patrice says, is not having enough funds to fully implement the program. With more money, Patrice would contract with additional local health department staff to recruit more providers into the program and provide incentives to participating child care providers. Currently, TOP Star only has sixteen trained consultants for the entire state's 1,221 licensed child care centers. Patrice would also re-hire the half-time coordinator to help her support the program.

Patrice also says that getting busy child care providers interested in improving their centers' nutrition and physical activity environments is often tough, although some of the consultants are excellent recruiters!

The Important Role of the Public Health Nutritionist

As a public health nutritionist, and with her expertise in maternal and child health, Patrice is very knowledgeable about best practices in early care and education. She has excellent relationships with many people in the early care field and is skilled in bringing together people from a spectrum of interests.

ASPHN in Action

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At ASPHN, we build our members' skills as public health nutritionists by providing key resources and professional development.

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