

Child Obesity and Violence Connection



Children become overweight because their bodies use less energy than they consume – they take in more calories through food than they burn through physical activity. Since the 1970's, rates in child obesity have been on the rise. While there are a number of factors contributing to this increase, it is the lack of physical activity that often raises the attention of those working to promote the well being of children through reducing and preventing violence.

When designing obesity prevention and intervention measures for children, those who work with children living in neighborhoods with high levels of community violence cannot ignore the barriers to physical activity encountered by these children. Research conducted in Chicago by the Harvard Project on Human Development found a link between violence and social disorder in Chicago neighborhoods and levels of physical activity among children and adolescents living in these neighborhoods. Researchers found that the more unsafe a neighborhood was perceived to be, the less time children spent in recreational physical activities. The same was true in neighborhoods with high levels of social disorder (as defined by adult loitering, public intoxication, prostitution, drug selling, adult fighting and the presence of gangs).

Children who lived in neighborhoods with high levels of social disorder engaged in half the amount of recreational physical activity as those children who lived in neighborhoods with the least amount of disorder.

While the affect of neighborhood safety on children's activity levels is a reality for children in many Chicago neighborhoods, the physical activity levels of children from all Chicago neighborhoods are affected as time spent watching television and playing video games increases. The increase in hours spent watching television has been linked to both the increase in child obesity rates and increase in the aggressive behavior of children. A study recently conducted by Stanford University demonstrated the overlap of these issues. The study found a 50% decrease in verbal aggression and a 40% decrease in physical aggression after implementing a school-based curriculum that encouraged third and fourth grade children to turn off their televisions and video games. Researchers also found that schools where the curriculum was introduced also noted a significant reduction in obesity and overeating problems.

Stress, domestic violence, community violence, safety issues, addiction to TV and video games, the violent messages of many shows and games, are all connected to children and obesity...making these connections as we provide services, enhances the work of prevention.