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Commentary on Olvera et al.'s Article Entitled, "Physical Activity in Latino Children: Research and Its Implications"

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Prelude

As a researcher and educator in the area of physical activity behavior and a parent, I am extra sensitive to and appreciative of the attention being given to the youth (children and adolescents) obesity epidemic. As clearly summarized by Dr. Olvera and colleagues, overweight and obesity are increasing at dramatic rates especially in racial/ethnic minority youth. Although troubling for all, it is particularly salient for Latinos who are the largest minority population in the U.S. In 2006, Latinos numbered 44 million and accounted for the majority of the nation's population growth.¹

Engaging in recommended levels of physical activity and reducing time spent in sedentary behaviors facilitate weight reduction/maintenance. It is therefore pertinent, as suggested by Dr. Olvera et al., that researchers work to uncover the reasons why Latinos are relatively inactive and sedentary and to use these findings to develop strategies that are efficient and effective at promoting physical activity in this population.

Details

Dr. Olvera et al. provide background information concerning the known correlates of physical activity in Latino youth. The correlates presented correspond with theories that posit behaviors are the products of personal, social, and environmental factors. This is an important way to present the data because it provides insight into how interventions should be developed and evaluated and their effects interpreted.

In the past ten years, there has been a substantial increase in the quantity and quality of research exploring relationships between aspects of the physical environment and physical activity. Although studies in this area on Latino youth are sparse, they are beginning to emerge. Dr. Olvera is one of the first researchers to show that a community-oriented intervention involving environmental changes positively affects physical activity and fitness in Latino children. This is important because it may allow us to shift some of the responsibility for promoting physical activity away from overburdened school systems to community organizations and parents. The policy recommendations put forth by Dr. Olvera et al. clearly emphasize the involvement of community entities in physical activity promotion.

Additions

Our research group has used community-based participatory research (CBPR) to build, operate, and evaluate a physical activity intervention (Kansas City Fit In Time – KC-FIT). Initial evaluations indicate KC-FIT is efficacious for garnering community trust and involvement, inducing

changes in the community's environment that support physical activity, and increasing physical activity levels of youth and adults.² Small business contributions played a major role and we are currently developing an approach for stimulating small businesses' support of youth physical activity opportunities in under-served, racial/ethnic minority neighborhoods.

Interventions like KC-FIT and Dr. Olvera's BOUNCE are "grass roots" efforts. They allow for cultural expression to permeate all levels and aspects of the intervention (design through evaluation; organizations through individuals). This may be particularly important in the Latino community.

Summary

Interventions need to be constructed "outside the gym." Allowing participants to be involved in designing and delivering intervention components seems to be a much better approach than having intervention specialists delegate what the components will be (e.g. kick boxing Mondays and Fridays at 6 pm in the cafeteria, etc.). This opens the door for inclusion of physical activities that are interesting to participants. For example, in one of our previous studies² a community resident (not a researcher) came up with the idea to start a Tai Chi litter clean-up class. The class was well received, provided an exercise opportunity and beautified the environment. Truly unique! It also would be helpful to distribute more evenly the responsibilities for physical activity promotion among community entities (churches, schools, residents, businesses, governments). According to recommendations put forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention an important component to consider in physical activity interventions is the involvement of all community entities.³

Further Recommendations

- Researchers should explore community-based participatory research as an option for physical activity promotion in Latino communities and conduct extensive process evaluations using established methods such as the RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, Maintenance) framework.
- Practitioners should find alternative methods for funding physical activity opportunities available to Latino youth. Shifting responsibility for promoting physical activity in Latino youth from traditional entities (government) to non-traditional entities (small business) is a sound solution for both public health and economic efficiency advocates.

- Policy makers at higher levels (e.g., state legislature) need to recognize the approaches being taken by policy makers at the "grass roots" level and develop policies that benefit their efforts. This would be more efficient (cut red tape and give tools for success to those involved in the action), provide a sense of control to local activists (empowerment), and potentially spark innovative strategies for promoting physical activity based on a community's race, economic and situational cultures.

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