

Reducing Obesity in Adolescent Girls and the Power of Positive Education:

**A Collaboration of the PAL (Police Athletic League) Positive Images Program
and Thomas Jefferson University, Jefferson School of Nursing**

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The World Health Organization has declared obesity a global epidemic.¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention link the obesity epidemic to poor nutrition, an over-consumption of food, and sedentary behaviors.²

In children this epidemic is particularly daunting; more than 17% of children are considered obese.³ The number of young adults regularly engaging in moderate to vigorous exercise has dramatically decreased, while weekly television and video viewing has increased.⁴ Studies now link childhood obesity to the early onset of chronic illnesses that were once associated with middle to late adulthood.^{2,3} The incidence of type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents is estimated to have increased twenty-fold in the past two decades.⁵

The burden of obesity-related illness on the youth of our country, and in turn, on our healthcare system, is sobering and can no longer be ignored.⁶

Adolescence is a time when many future health behaviors begin to develop.² Given that a sedentary lifestyle and poor dietary habits that begin in childhood generally continue into adulthood, this developmental period is an opportunity to create community interventions that encourage positive health behaviors and offer a broader range of increased physical activity. Diet and lifestyle strategies taught at an early age appear to have a profound impact on reducing morbidity and mortality rates related to obesity later in life.⁷ Interventional studies have demonstrated the beneficial impact of dietary modifications and increased physical activity on markers of cardiovascular risk, including regression of pre-clinical measures of arterial disease.⁸

In response to this community health need, and at the request of the Police Athletic League (PAL), in 2007 Jefferson School of Nursing (JSN) RN-BSN students designed a comprehensive health education curriculum for PAL's Positive Images program, instituted at all 19 PAL centers throughout Philadelphia.⁶ The program, which is 12 weeks long, aims to build self-esteem and ambition among girls ages 11-17. To date, hundreds of girls are enrolled in this unique program.⁹ The focus is on nutrition and exercise, taught in a highly interactive environment via "teacher-guide modules."

Jefferson RN-BSN students began the process of creating a curriculum by first visiting various PAL sites and meeting with the teachers and girls. These meetings helped the students learn the challenges of healthy living for adolescent and teenage girls who reside in Philadelphia. After understanding the concept and mission of the Positive Images program, the students created modules that examined principles of healthy living based on good nutritional choices that are consistent with the realities of living in an urban environment.

Girls in the program explored issues that promoted their personal growth and well-being, including obesity and body image, adequate sleep, coping with stress, and building a positive self-image. Since weight management is related to diet and exercise, each learning module suggests exercise regimes that are not only cost-effective and interesting to young adults, but also that can be done without the need of expensive formalized exercise programs.

This collaboration between JSN and PAL was truly a "win-win." The education curriculum supported PAL's mission to cultivate and encourage self-esteem among teenage girls in Philadelphia. The JSN RN-BSN students gained valuable experience in collaborating with a Philadelphia community agency toward effecting positive change in the health status of young people. They also gained experience as nurse-leaders in the community.

The program is ongoing, and JSN RN-BSN students continue to serve as teacher-guides in the educational component. Research results are pending. PAL, enthused about participation in and response to the healthy living curriculum of the Positive Images program, has asked us to create mirror educational modules for "Boys2Men," an established program aimed at young males, with similar goals and objectives.

Governments, international partners, civil society, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector all have vital roles to play in shaping healthy environments and making healthier diet options more affordable and more easily accessible. This is especially important for the most vulnerable in society: the poor and their children—those

among us who have limited choices about the food they eat and the environments in which they live.¹⁰

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