



## **Engaging Early Childcare Centers in New Brunswick in HEPA Guidelines**

*A Project of the Raritan Valley YMCA,  
The Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick  
and The New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids – New Brunswick*

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## Executive Summary

In collaboration with the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids – New Brunswick, the Raritan Valley YMCA and the Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick are working with local early childcare centers to assess the implementation of national YMCA standards for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) in New Brunswick. In this initiative, the pilot project assessed 4 of the 21 childcare centers contacted about their implementation of the Y-USA HEPA standards.

Using a checklist format, centers' written documents were reviewed for their inclusion of the recommended policies; then centers were visited to observe whether the recommended standards were followed in practice. This pilot project found several strong aspects in these centers, especially concerning observations about foods and beverages. Key findings:

## Nutrition

- Of the 10 HEPA policies concerning food and nutrition, all 4 centers were *observed* to be following 8 of the policies, although fewer than half had incorporated these policies into their written documents.
- The policies least often observed in practice were serving fruits or vegetables at every meal and snack, and serving no fried foods.

## Physical Activity

- Fewer than half the 4 centers were *observed* to be implementing the 3 policies concerning amount of time for and types of physical activity.
- However, 3 centers had incorporated 2 of the policies into their policy documents.

## Parent Engagement

- Only one center was observed to provide parent events or materials.
- No center had the relevant parent engagement policies in its documents.
- The policy concerning “screen time” was marked “not applicable” because none of these facilities used electronic equipment with the children.

**Next Steps and Recommendations** are provided.

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### **Introduction**

With increased numbers of overweight and obese children in the United States, early childcare centers have become increasingly important as locations where good habits for healthy eating and physical activity (HEPA) are formed. Pre-school children may spend substantial portions of their waking hours in childcare centers, therefore it is important for these centers to develop and follow appropriate policies for providing healthy food and engaging the children in vigorous physical activity. These centers can also provide parents and other caregivers with good advice on these HEPA topics to help them to create and maintain healthy habits at home.

The national Y-USA has become a leader in policy and systems-change efforts to make sure that child care and after-school programs provide healthy nutritional choices and opportunities for appropriate physical activity. The Y-USA has worked with the Partnership for a Healthier America and the *Let's Move* campaign to develop a set of Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) Standards to provide guidance to childcare organizations in basic nutritional and physical activity practices.

To focus on these issues locally, the Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick convened by Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School works with community stakeholders to improve health and wellness for New Brunswick residents. Since 2009 the Alliance's Nutrition and Physical Activity Coalition has worked with the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids – New Brunswick to improve policies and environments in support of healthy eating and physical activity within the school and the community.

In collaboration with the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids – New Brunswick, (NJPHK-NB) a multi-year initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Raritan Valley YMCA and Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick are working with local early childcare centers to assess the implementation of these standards in New Brunswick. The New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids works in 5 cities in New Jersey on policy and environmental change to reduce childhood obesity. One of its initiatives in New Brunswick is to work with childcare centers to assess and implement the Y-USA HEPA standards.

## **Project Background**

In August 2013, the Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick and New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids – New Brunswick convened community partners to discuss promoting the Y-USA HEPA standards in New Brunswick preschools. Working with New Brunswick preschool staff, representatives from Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and the Raritan Valley YMCA met with the preschool center directors in March 2014 and then conducted a short needs assessment survey. The purpose of this survey was to understand the preschools' needs for nutrition and physical activity information and materials, as well as their interest in types of training compatible with their schedules. The needs assessment survey was sent to 25 preschools and was completed by 10 preschools.

Survey answers indicated that a majority of preschools needed information about how to incorporate more physical activity into a child's day, whereas only a few wanted information about serving healthy food. There was almost unanimous interest in providing materials to and engaging parents about both healthy eating and physical activity for their children. The survey also indicated that about half of the preschools were interested in on site trainings and two thirds were interested in half-day trainings for teachers and aides on the new standards.

In September 2014, as a result of this survey, the Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick and New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids – New Brunswick held two short trainings / open houses where representatives from the Raritan Valley YMCA introduced preschool directors to the HEPA standards and the CATCH curriculum.

## **HEPA Assessment in New Brunswick**

The HEPA assessment project was piloted in four childcare centers, by examining the extent to which the Y-USA HEPA Standards were present in their documents and observable during site visits. Following feedback from this detailed assessment, the project will assist the centers to upgrade their policies and practices in accordance with the standards. The participating centers will be offered free staff training in a physical activity and healthy eating curriculum called C.A.T.C.H. (Coordinated Approach to Child Health). They will also be able to consult with YMCA leadership and fitness specialists for further guidance on space use. Center staff are also urged to meet with food vendors regarding better menu choices.

For this assessment, the Y-USA HEPA Standards were summarized into a checklist format (see below for the specific wording of the checklist items). Childcare centers were recruited to participate via a letter sent to the Directors of 25 centers in New Brunswick, and four centers volunteered to be pilot participants. Participating childcare centers were asked to submit existing documents that would provide the basis for the policy review. Project staff from the Raritan Valley YMCA then scored the documents for the presence or absence of the

explicit policies called for by the standards. The types and numbers of documents reviewed are listed in the Appendix. In a subsequent site visit to each center, lasting from 1 to 1 1/2 hours, the Y staff observed whether each policy was or was not followed in practice, and talked to staff members about their usual practices. This report presents information recorded for both the document review and site visits for the first four centers in the project.

### **Policies on Food and Nutrition**

The Y-USA HEPA Standards include ten policies that pertain to foods and beverages served in each Center.<sup>1</sup> (There are several additional standards for infant feeding, which were not applicable for the Centers in this project.) These policies are the following:

1. Fruits or vegetables served at every meal and snack.
2. Meals and snacks are served family style (children serve themselves from common bowls).
3. Serving size of fruits & vegetables is ½ Cup, or a whole fruit (1/4 C. for children under age 3).
4. No fried foods are served, including e.g., frozen pre-fried foods.
5. No fried foods are allowed to be brought from home, such as chips or other fried snacks.
6. Safe drinking water is available to children at all times, both indoors and outdoors.
7. Sweetened beverages are not served in the program.
8. Sweetened beverages may not be brought from home.
9. Milk served (to those above age 2) should be unflavored 1% or non-fat milk.
10. If juice is served, it should be no more than 4-6 oz./day of 100% juice.

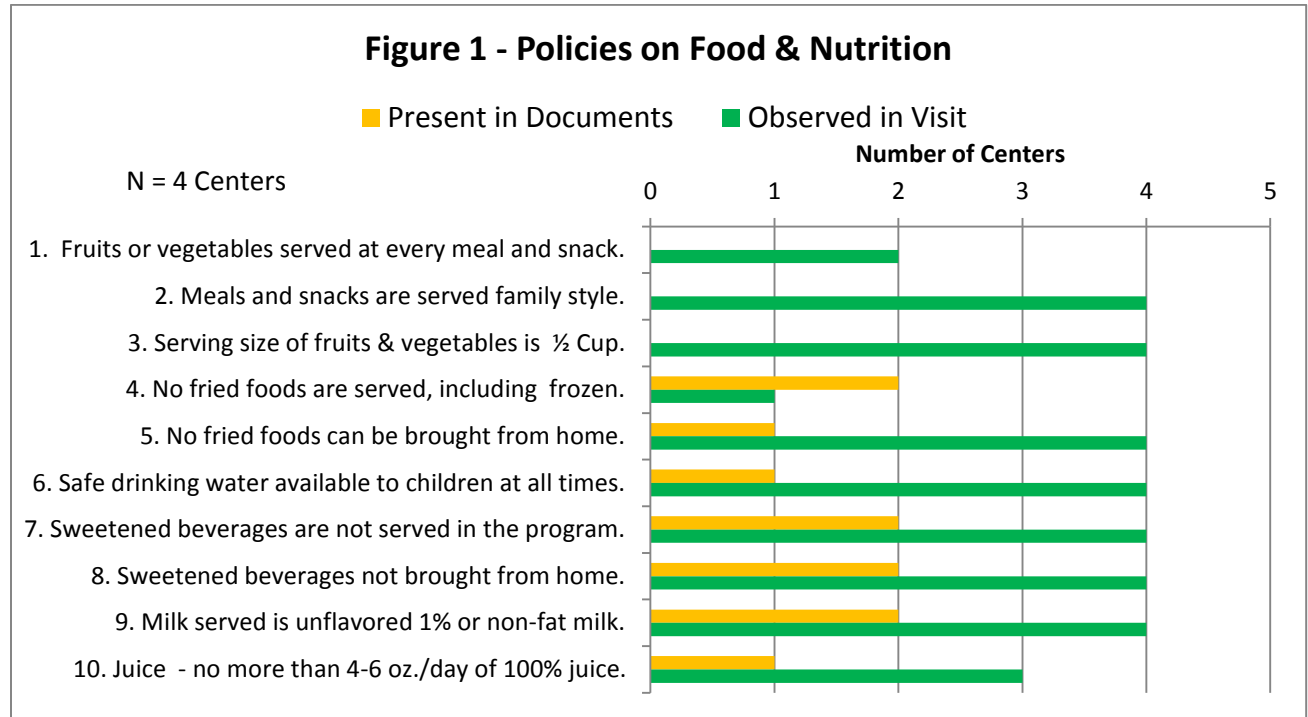
Data collected about food and nutrition in the four centers in this pilot project are shown in Figure 1. For each standard, the document coder checked whether it was present in the policy documents sent from each center, whether that policy standard was not included, or if the coder was uncertain about whether that standard was clearly present in the documents. After each site visit the visitors then indicated whether that standard was observed during the visit, was not followed during the visit, or if the site visitor was uncertain if that policy or practice was present or not.

The resulting data for the four centers are shown in Figure 1. Interestingly, many of the policies on food and nutrition were more often observed during the site visit than were present in the written policies: seven of the policies were observed at all four centers, but five of those policies were present in only one or two sets of policy documents reviewed and two were not included at all in the documents reviewed. The site visitor noted that several centers had unofficial verbal policies about foods and beverages, which were not yet reflected in their

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<sup>1</sup> The wording of the Y-USA HEPA standards used here was minimally adapted from the HEPA Association Report Template for Raritan Valley YMCA, a document review conducted by Altarum Institute for the Y-USA, September 19, 2014.

documents. The policy least often observed in practice was having no fried foods served, present in only one center. Only two centers were observed to serve fruits or vegetables at every meal and snack. None of the centers had incorporated all ten of these basic standards into their policy documents.



### Policies on Physical Activity, Parent Engagement and Screen Time

The Y-USA HEPA Standards contain three policies concerning physical activity, plus three policies on parent engagement and the recommended amount of screen time for these pre-school children. These policies state the following:

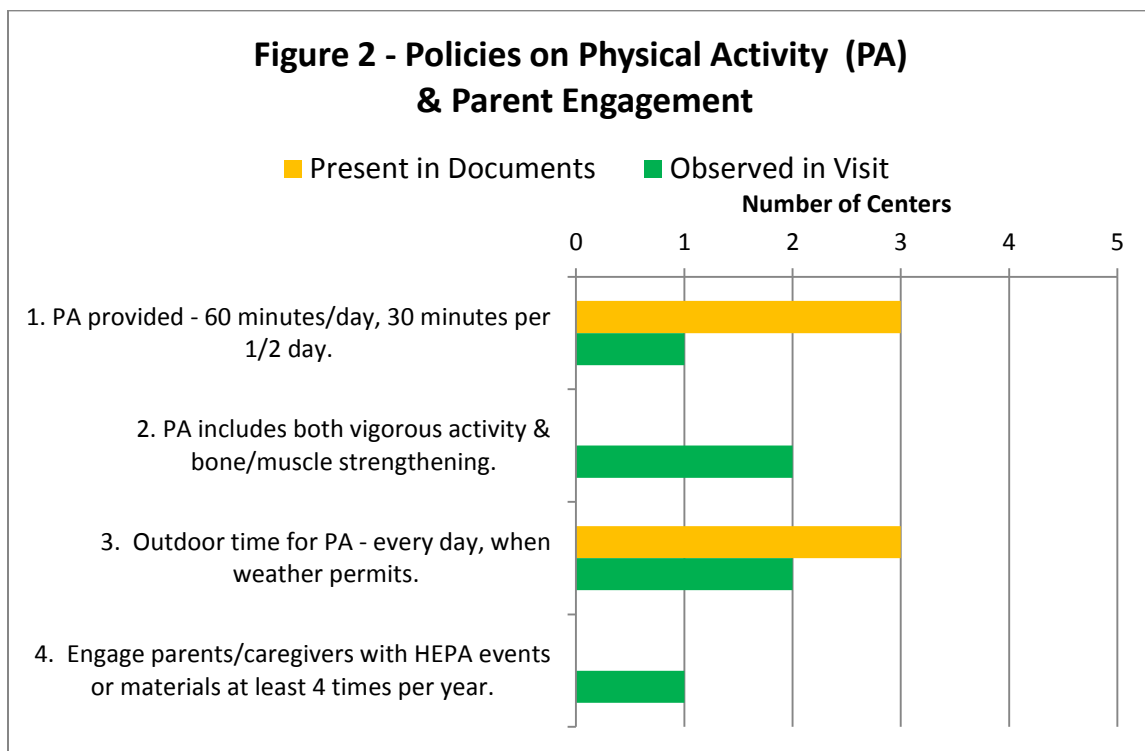
1. Opportunities for physical activity are provided for at least 60 minutes for a full day program or 30 minutes for a half-day program.
2. Physical activity includes both vigorous activity and bone/muscle strengthening activity.
3. Outdoor time for PA is provided every day, when weather permits.
4. Engage parents/caregivers with HEPA events or materials (e.g. newsletters, handouts) at least 4 times per year.

5. Screen time (includes television, videos, computers, movies, etc.) is limited to less than 30 minutes/day for half-day programs and less than 60 minutes/day for full-day programs.

6. No screen time for children under 2 years old.

Procedures for the physical activity and parent engagement policies were the same as those for the food and nutrition policies: the document coder scored each policy as present, uncertain or not present in the policy documents provided by each center, then as observed, uncertain, or not followed after the site visit. However, the coder marked the policies about “screen time” as “not applicable” since these facilities did not have any electronic equipment available for the children.

As shown in Figure 2, the physical activity policies were less often observed as present in the centers than were the food and nutrition policies. Three of the four centers had the



recommended policies about physical activity time and outdoors play, but these were able to be observed in only one or two centers. No center policy document explicitly required vigorous activity and bone/muscle strengthening activity; however, these were observed in two of the four centers. The site visitor commented that space constraints indoors limited the extent of physical activity offered in several centers, and bad weather outdoors during one site visit did not permit outdoors activity.

Only one center indicated that it engaged with parents about HEPA events or materials at least four times per year, and no center had this policy in their formal documents. The site visitor noted that an after-school program reported that its time with the children was too short to engage the parents, even with written materials. The total absence of screen time in these centers was a desirable sign of their positive engagement with the children.

## **Discussion**

This pilot project found several strong aspects among the four centers' policies and practices concerning the HEPA standards. All four were observed to be following most of the standards about foods and beverages offered to the children, especially to eliminate sweetened beverages (although the observation was conducted on only one day at each center). It would be desirable to have these verbal policies incorporated into the centers' policy documents, to make sure that they are permanent if staffing changes or other changes occur. Only one or two centers were observed to have fruit or vegetables at every meal or snack and to serve no fried foods; these are areas that might be improved with better meal planning and healthier purchases from food vendors.

The findings about physical activity and parent engagement were not quite as positive, with the recommended policies more often present in written documents than were observed during site visits. Center staff members reported that their space constraints limited the amount of physical activity possible. Perhaps more creative ideas about the use of space could enable more physical activity, such as use of hallway space, consolidation of furniture, or use of off-site activity space through shared use agreements. Staff training in the area of physical education may help to increase movement activities in the centers. Director expectations and the institution of a curriculum into center programming and schedules should allow increased activity. Another option is to hire a part-time physical educator. The observation that only one center was engaging parents in events or materials about healthy eating or physical activity at home suggests that an opportunity is being neglected for educating parents in ways to keep their children healthy.

This pilot project suggests that some early childcare centers are making progress toward meeting recommended Y-USA standards for healthy eating and physical activity. But further improvements are needed, especially in serving more fruits and vegetables, eliminating fried foods, engaging parents, and ensuring daily physical activity. To make sure that these changes are permanent, they need to be included in the written documents. Collecting this information is only a first step toward improving practice in these and other centers. Expanding this project to include more of the 25 centers that were initially contacted could increase the numbers of early childcare locations that provide evidence about their healthier practices. Currently, we have no evidence about the extent of observance of HEPA standards in the other 21 centers.



Making sure that larger numbers of early childcare centers are following recommended practices for healthier eating and physical activity could help substantially to reduce the extent of unhealthy weight among these preschoolers, and to put children on a good path toward becoming healthier adults.

### **Next Steps and Recommendations**

Note: Maria Pellerano, from the Alliance for a Healthier New Brunswick and Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and Gina Stravic, Executive Director, Raritan Valley YMCA contributed these next steps and recommendations.

After completing this pilot assessment, the project staff plans to undertake the following *next steps* for assisting the child care centers with improvements needed to meet the HEPA standards:

- Provide preschools with existing materials for parents about nutrition and physical activity.
- Offer CATCH curriculum training to teachers and aides at participating preschools
- Create a short document based on the recommendations below that could be distributed to all preschools.
- Encourage other centers to participate in the assessment project.

### ***Recommendations for the Preschools***

Revising Policies:

- Use a model policy document to incorporate the Y-USA nutritional and physical activity standards into the written policies, particularly those that are already being observed. For example add “fruits or vegetables are served at every meal and snack” to the policy.
- Institute accountability process in job descriptions, curriculum and performance evaluations.

Improving Nutrition:

- Work with vendors to incorporate healthier foods into meals served at preschools, including:
  - Incorporate more uncooked fruits and vegetables into meals (for example baby carrots and apple slices).
  - Remove fried foods from meals including pre-fried items such as meat patties.

### Increasing Physical Activity:

- Attend CATCH Trainings to learn how to incorporate physical activity more easily into a preschooler's day.
- Use hallways and other "empty" spaces for physical activity time. For example, if a hallway is unused, kids could kick a small ball up and down the hall.
- Seek joint use agreements for off-site physical activity space.

## Appendix - Documents Reviewed

The table below shows the numbers of centers that provided each type of document for review for this project.

# of Centers	Document
4	<b>Daily schedule/Lesson plan</b> — A daily schedule of events that lists specific times and corresponding activities.
2	<b>Meal and Snack Menu</b> — Provides information on types of foods and beverages served each day for snack and meals.
	<b>Center provides</b> (numbers of centers providing each meal):
2	Breakfast
1	Snacks
4	Lunch
1	Dinner
2	Food and Drink for Special Events Only
0	Parents Send Food from Home
3	<b>Parent Handbook</b> — A document for parents that describes all program policies.
3	<b>Staff Handbook</b> — A document for staff that describes all of the program's policies and/or staff expectations for conduct, instruction, meal times, etc.
4	<b>Additional Site Policies</b> — Other policies not included in handbooks listed above, related to healthy eating or physical activity/active play (includes policies related to inclement weather, appropriate attire for play, etc.).
1	<b>Parent Outreach/Educational Documents</b> — Educational materials for parents such as newsletters, program materials, activity night flyers and other documents that are used to educate parents on their child's nutrition and physical activity.
1	<b>Events for Parents</b> — Information about in-person events for parents which include HEPA educational information.

Note: The document coder reported that 2 centers combined the staff and parent handbooks into one document.