



Successful programmes to reduce childhood overweight and obesity

Last Updated : 03 May 2018

Are you a city mayor, a school principal, or an active parent who cares about a healthy environment for your children? This article will help you to find successful measures that can impact the healthiness of your school or neighbourhood.

Childhood and adolescence are critical periods to introduce and stimulate healthy habits. However, the current numbers of children with obesity or overweight show that it is easier said than done. Many of those lifestyle habits are established in schools and kindergarten, where children spend most of their time. Moreover, habits learnt at a young age have a good chance to survive through to adulthood, and there may also be a positive effect through a child influencing the health behaviours of the family. So, how to prevent and tackle childhood obesity?

JANPA - the Joint Action on Nutrition and Physical Activity - has been a European initiative aimed at identifying and collecting successful strategies to prevent overweight in children and adolescents. As part of their work, they have developed a [web-based toolbox](#) with an overview of measures that were successful in introducing good health practices in early life, for example in schools. The easy-to-use tool categorises the measures by 'action areas' as defined in the [EU Action Plan for Childhood Obesity](#), and has a number of filters, e.g. the school type (pre-school, primary school, etc.).

Interventions at school

What do most successful school programmes have in common? They facilitate healthy eating and physical activity. Examples include offering nutrition education, introducing compulsory physical activity classes, and making sure that healthy meals are always available (Table 1). Another example comes from the European [STRENGTH2FOOD project](#), which aims to improve both the nutritional quality and sustainability of school meals by looking into the public food procurement systems and

(short) food supply chains.

In general, integrated approaches – where physical activities and nutrition education are both implemented in schools – have the highest potential in preventing weight gain in children. What's more, these programmes do not increase social inequality in health, as they provide an easy access to physical activity and healthy food to children from all social classes.

Restricting food marketing and advertising in schools is an important measure. Schools can consult a World Health Organization (WHO) tool – [Nutrient Profile Model](#) – to assess whether products contain too much sugar, salt, and/or fat.

To successfully achieve a better prevention of childhood obesity, experts agree that it is crucial to start early in life and that all actors involved must work together towards the same goal. These include families, schools, doctors, food producers and (local) policy makers. The JANPA [web-based toolbox](#) makes it much easier for local decision makers, schools and parents to find trustworthy information on successful measures that are suitable for their school or neighbourhood.

Table 1. Examples of successful measures to prevent childhood obesity

Successful measure	Examples
• Facilitate physical activity	• Introduce active breaks in schools
• Provide easy access to the healthy foods • Eliminate unhealthy foods	• Make contract only with companies providing healthy options for food and drinks options sold and/or provided in schools. • Monitor the numbers, content and placement of vending machines. • Ensure that safe drinking water is always accessible.
• Restrict marketing for unhealthy food	• Prohibit all advertising directed at children under 18 years in child welfare and child protection institutions, kindergartens, elementary schools and their dormitories.
• Improve education on nutrition and healthy lifestyle	• Provide nutrition training to teachers and to school kitchen staff.
• Care for children with overweight	• Measure children's weight and height periodically. • Give feedback to children with overweight and their parents with leaflets and online resources to promote healthy life style practices. • Insert children affected by obesity a supervised lifestyle program.
• Monitor and screen for children have developed overweight	• National school-based surveillance system assessing the physical and motor development of children.
• Take initiative	• In the absence of national or municipal regulation, establish own school policies. • Open the schools to parents to make them aware of the pedagogy and be active in the process.