Rethinking physical activity for children: implications for the working poor

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Abstract

Beauchamp, Rhodes, and Nigg propose a tripartite framework necessary for increasing physical activity among elementary-aged children. This framework includes legislation to increase time spent in physical activity during the school day, an extension of the school day for physical activity, and supervision of this time by trained teachers. If implemented, this framework could significantly increase the amount of time elementary-aged children spend in physical activity. Extending the school day also has the potential to alleviate child care anxiety in low-resource households as well as have farther-reaching family and societal impacts.

Keywords

Exercise, Health disparities, Families, Socioeconomic status

In this issue, Beauchamp, Rhodes, and Nigg propose a tripartite framework for increasing physical activity among elementary-aged children [1]. The three prongs of this framework include legislation that requires all schools in North America meet current recommendations of 150 min of physical education (PE) per week for elementary school students [2], an extension of the school day by up to 1 h for the express purpose of physical activity, and the supervision of this time by teachers trained in PE or physical activity. In the USA, Healthy People 2020 acknowledges the need for more PE and recess time in elementary schools [3]. Similarly, in Canada, a federal, provincial, and territorial framework to curb childhood obesity recognized the need for supportive environments including availability of physical activity in schools and quality PE opportunities [4]. As the Beauchamp article notes [1], such efforts are but one necessary component if we want to see a measurable impact in elementary-aged children's physical activity rates.

The proposed tripartite framework, especially the extension of the school day for physical activity led by trained teachers, may be particularly helpful in increasing physical activity levels of children living in low-resource households. Data indicate children and adults with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to be overweight and engage in less physical activity

Implications

Policy: Policymakers who want to truly shift population health forward must make the healthy choice the easy choice, and adopting the initiatives in this tripartite framework would be a positive step in that direction.

Research: Research suggests each piece of the framework could increase time spent in physical activity, and future studies should examine whether the initiatives also work synergistically to increase physical activity among elementary-aged children.

Practice: Adding an extra hour to the school day could provide family and societal benefits that extend beyond the health benefits of increased physical activity among elementary-aged children.

as well as more screen time [5–7]. Eighty-five percent of parents in the USA work full-time with another 15% working part-time [8]. Ten and a half million individuals who work are classified as working poor, individuals who work but still have an income level below the poverty line [9]. Women as well as African Americans and Latinos are most likely to be part of the working poor [9]. What does an extended school day mean for working families, especially the working poor?

Extending the school day is not a new concept, and the potential economic impact of this approach over increased physical activity through after-school programs has been debated in the literature [10–12]. Much of the economic argument has focused on the school level with little mention of potential family costs or cost savings [10–12]. In communities where a large number of families live below the poverty line, 83% of parents agree after-school programming helps working parents keep their jobs and 82% agree such programs give parents peace of mind about their children when at work [13]. However, for many of these families, finding and affording such programming are difficult if not impossible [13]. Families report spending over US\$100/week on after-school programs or other child care [13, 14]. In addition, almost 9% of

families (4% of families living below the poverty line) report having a 5–11-year-old taking care of themselves for approximately 1 h per weekday [14]. Extending the school day by 1 h could have important cost savings at the family level as well as extended benefits (i.e., child safety, job security, decreased anxiety over child care) for working parents, especially when parents do not make enough to afford adequate after-school care.

After-school programs are diverse with only some programs including physical activity and few having adequately trained teachers [15, 16]. For those after-school programs that do include physical activity, increasing children's levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity to recommended levels has been difficult [16, 17]. Extending the school day for the purpose of providing physical activity has the potential to increase physical activity rates more than general after-school programming. In addition, parents in communities affected by poverty indicate safety is a major concern with regard to after-school care [13]. Low-income parents whose children attended a summer culinary program expressed high levels of program acceptability in part because the program addressed their concerns over kitchen safety and healthy eating [18]. The incorporation of dedicated physical activity time into the school day with trained teachers may alleviate similar concerns by parents with regard to physical activity. Beauchamp and coauthors are correct in highlighting the need for trained teachers to lead physical activity programming. Previous literature indicates the need for teachers to be trained by individuals with certification or formal training in physical activity in order for their proposed extra hour to have maximum impact on children's time spent in physical activity [16].

Despite the positive aspects of the proposal by Beauchamp and coauthors, additional consideration and data are needed for practitioners wanting to move forward the tripartite framework. An additional hour in the school day would potentially come with school-level costs, although the amount of those costs, as noted above, is unclear [10–12]. In addition, as the Beauchamp article notes, extending the school day has primarily been considered as a way to provide more classroom time. Downsized school budgets often go hand-in-hand with underperformance in key academic areas. Extending the school day for physical activity and not classroom time in such districts will be a hard sell to both tax payers and school administrators. The authors recognized this potential conflict and note the link between academic benefits and engagement in physical activity; however, that argument has not led to change to date and additional arguments are needed to make the proposed framework a reality. Focusing on the potential economic and social impact on working families may be one way to move public opinion.

There is also a need to envision the tripartite framework across all grade levels and not just within elementary schools. Most families do not include only

elementary-aged children. To fully assist working families, extension of the school day across grades would be more realistic and result in more impactful physical activity, family, and societal effects. The drop in physical activity with age, especially among girls, is a noted phenomenon [5], which continued engagement through an extended school day could help address. In addition, older children are often seen as not needing child care after school yet the hours of 3 pm to 6 pm are the peak time for juvenile crime and engagement in risky behaviors [19, 20].

Beauchamp and coauthors point to three key factors they feel need to be addressed collectively in order to impact the physical activity rates of elementary-aged children [1]. Each component of their framework needs to be evaluated for its potential benefits and risks to the whole population as well as those populations with the most to gain or lose. While legislation focused on the time students spend in physical activity has its own risks and benefits, I focused on the extended school day component of the framework. Given current school and work day structures in the USA, extending the school day by 1 h has the potential to alleviate some of the child care anxiety faced by many families, with additional potential for farther-reaching family and societal impacts. Those practitioners aiming to move forward the proposed framework should consider such economic and societal benefits in their arguments for a concentrated focus on physical activity during the school day. Pushback from tax payers, school administrators, and government officials will not be insignificant, especially in school districts where there are budget and/or academic performance concerns. Despite these concerns, having extended time at school focused on physical activity and conducted by trained teachers does have the potential to increase physical activity rates more than general after-school care while providing an important service to working parents.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosures: Study findings have not been previously published nor have they been simultaneously submitted elsewhere. None of the data presented has previously been reported. This article does not include primary data; however, the journal can review any necessary files used in this article.

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