



The Power of Play: Fighting Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity presents a critical and widespread issue for Indiana children. One in three Hoosier children ages 10-17 are overweight or obese (33.9%). While childhood obesity presents a concern nationally, this issue is especially relevant in Indiana. Hoosier children are 14.9% more likely to be obese than their peers nationwide. This ranks Indiana as the 9th highest rate of childhood overweight and obesity. In comparison to all neighboring states, Indiana has the highest rate.¹

Across the nation, childhood obesity rates have tripled since 1980, with especially sharp increases in obesity among young children ages 2 to 5 in recent years.² In comparison, the rate of overweight and obesity among Indiana high school students has risen 6.2% in the past ten years. Indiana also faces significant disparities, with youth of color more likely to be overweight or obese than their white peers. Over thirty-eight percent of Hispanic Hoosier high school students are overweight or obese, compared to 34.6% of black students and 29.8% of white students.³

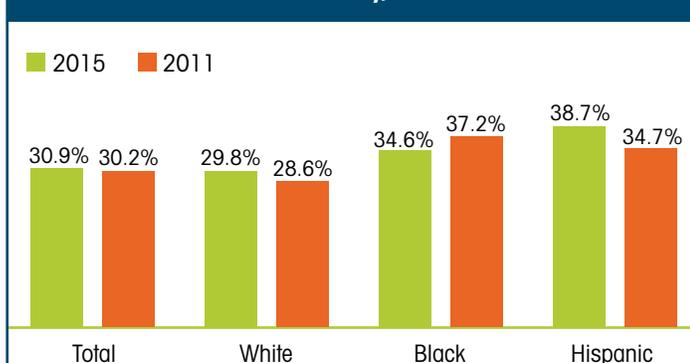


How does overweight and obesity affect youth?

Children who are overweight or obese face greater risk for other chronic health conditions. Overweight children face an increased risk of high cholesterol, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, type-2 diabetes, joint problems, and breathing problems such as sleep apnea and asthma.⁵ These health challenges can be long-lasting, as overweight and obese children are more likely to be overweight or obese as adults.⁶ Childhood obesity is also associated with higher lifetime health care costs. Compared to a child who maintains normal weight throughout adulthood, an obese child will accrue an estimated \$19,000 in additional lifetime medical costs.⁷

Children who are overweight may also face social and emotional challenges. Overweight children are more likely to experience bullying, social isolation, psychological challenges such as depression and anxiety, and lower self-

High School Students Who Are Overweight or Obese by Race/Ethnicity, Indiana



Source: National Survey of Children's Health
The CDC defines overweight as a body mass index (BMI) between the 85th and 95th percentile, while obese refers to a BMI above the 95th percentile for children of the same age and gender.⁴



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esteem.⁸ Experiences of bullying are in turn associated with decreased physical activity among overweight children.⁹

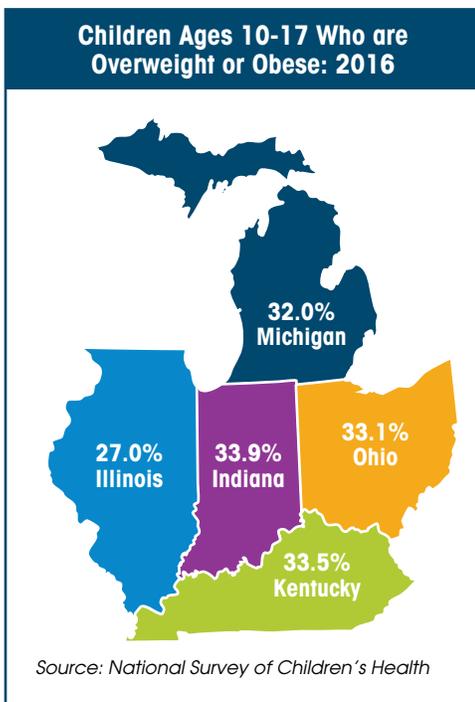
What factors contribute to childhood overweight and obesity?

Childhood overweight and obesity is a complex health issue and many biological, family, psychological, socioeconomic, and lifestyle factors play a role.¹⁰ These include nutrition,

More than 1 in 3 Hoosier families with children (36.7%) say they sometimes could not afford to eat nutritious meals in the past year.

screen time, media exposure, poverty, food insecurity, stress, community environment, sedentary lifestyles and biological factors such as genetics and metabolism.

Nutrition. Nutritional choices impact children’s day-to-day energy levels and ability to focus as well as long-term health outcomes such as overweight and obesity. A poor diet containing high levels of fat or sugar and few nutrients can contribute to childhood obesity.¹¹ Among Indiana high school students, 7.3% do not eat vegetables and 12.6% do not eat fruit in a typical week, representing a growing share of students who may lack important nutrients. Additionally, nearly 1 in 5 Indiana high school students consume drinks that are high in sugar on a daily basis.

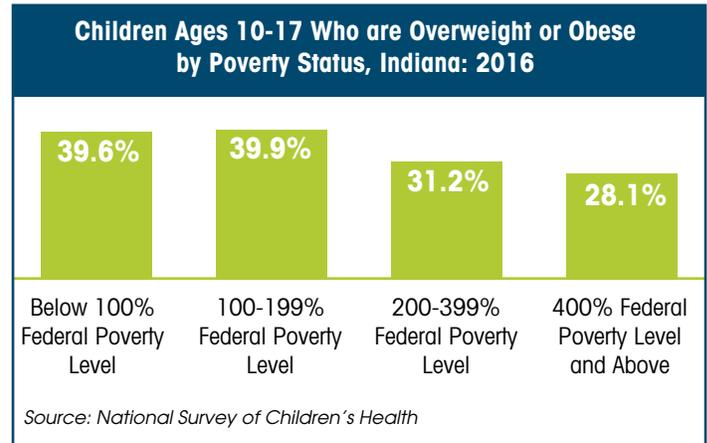


Twenty percent of Indiana high school students typically drink soda at least once per day and 18.7% drink sugar sweetened drinks at least once per day.¹²

Screen time and media exposure.

Among children, greater screen time is associated with an increased risk of being

overweight or obese.¹³ Screen time can contribute to sedentary behavior and reduced sleep, as well as unhealthy food choices. Children often eat more while viewing media, and children’s exposure to advertisements for unhealthy food products can affect future food preferences and is a significant risk factor for obesity.¹⁴ Nearly three-quarters of Hoosier children (72.1%) spend at least an hour per day watching TV or playing video games, and 7.5% spend four or more hours per day on TV or video games. Males, older children, children of color, children in low-income families,



and children who have experienced trauma are more likely to spend significant amounts of time in front of a TV.¹⁵

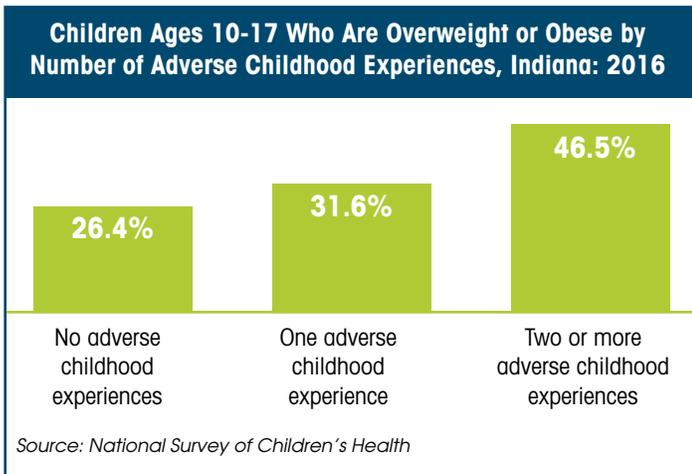
Poverty and food deserts. Children living in poverty are more likely to be overweight or obese (39.6%) than children from higher-income families. Children in low income neighborhoods often have limited access to full-service grocery stores where families can buy a variety of healthy food options. Instead, families may have to rely on small neighborhood convenience stores, where fresh produce and low-fat items are limited or may not be available at all. Healthy food access can be especially challenging for families who lack access to reliable transportation.¹⁶

5 Lowest Counties		5 Highest Counties	
Hamilton	11.8%	Switzerland	23.1%
Hendricks	12.7%	Grant	21.9%
Boone	12.9%	LaPorte	21.7%
Dubois	13.6%	Fayette	21.6%
Ohio	14.0%	Wayne	21.5%

Source: Feeding America

Food insecurity. Households without consistent access to adequate food are considered food insecure. Food insecurity can contribute to unhealthy cycles of food deprivation and overeating. Children who eat less or skip meals when food is unavailable may overeat when food does become

available. These chronic changes in food intake can contribute to weight gain, disordered eating behaviors, and metabolic changes that promote fat storage.¹⁷ In Indiana, 17.7% of children are food insecure, and food insecurity is often related to where a child lives.¹⁸ Hoosiers living in rural areas are more likely to experience food insecurity, and child food insecurity varies greatly across the state. A gap of 11.3 percentage points separates Indiana's highest and lowest counties.



Stress. Personal, parental, and family stress can increase a child's risk of obesity.¹⁹ Family and social stressors may include psychosocial stress, abuse or neglect, food or housing insecurity, and parental substance abuse. Experiences of stress can contribute to metabolic changes as well as behavioral changes like emotional eating, inactivity, and sleep disruption.²⁰ Children who have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are more likely to be overweight or obese than children with few or no ACEs.²¹

Community environment. A child's place of residence plays an important role in health and well-being. Neighborhood attributes such as walkability, safety, and appropriate spaces for play may encourage physical activity among children. Children who live in neighborhoods with amenities such as recreation centers tend to be more physically



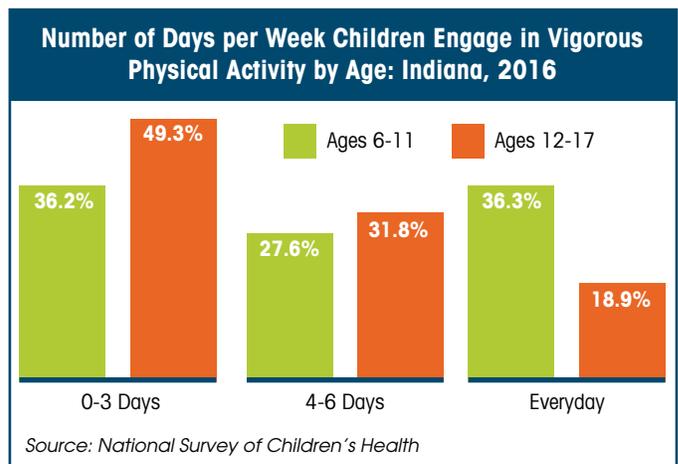
active than their peers.²² In Indiana, 35.3% of children live in neighborhoods with a recreation or community center, 64.5% live in neighborhoods with a park or playground, and 69.3% live in neighborhoods with sidewalks or walking paths.²³ Hoosier children are less likely to have access to neighborhood amenities than their peers nationally, and children in low-income neighborhoods often have less access to amenities than their peers in more affluent neighborhoods.²⁴

What are benefits of play for children?

Play involves engaging in an activity for enjoyment and recreation, and can take on many unique forms. Play provides an opportunity for children and youth to explore their imaginations, connect with other people, and grow physically, emotionally, and socially.

Play helps children and youth remain physically active.

The CDC recommends that children and teens get an hour or more of physical activity each day. Regular exercise in childhood and adolescence burns energy, helps children maintain a healthy weight, and promotes lifelong health and well-being. In addition to health benefits, physically active youth tend to have better grades, school attendance, cognitive performance, and classroom behaviors.²⁵ The best kind of exercise for long-term health benefits is activity that children enjoy. Youth and adults are more likely to commit to regular physical activity if they have fun doing so.²⁶ Play can help children find joy and passion in physical activity, and equip children with the skills, confidence, and knowledge for a lifetime of physical activity and health.



Play facilitates the development of valuable social and emotional skills.

Play helps youth build social and emotional skills, facilitates social development, and provides an opportunity to establish positive social connections. Cooperative play also provides children with opportunities to practice turn-taking, self-control, and conflict resolution skills. Less-structured play time is also associated with improved self-directed executive functioning in children.²⁷

Play provides an opportunity for children and youth to explore their imaginations, connect with other people, and grow physically, emotionally, and socially.

Play can encourage creativity and the use of imagination.

Research suggests that pretend play in childhood is associated with creativity and divergent thinking in adulthood.²⁸ Children engaged in pretend play use counterfactual reasoning: considering events that have not occurred and thinking about what things would be like if they had. Children use these cognitive skills to plan for the future and learn about the world, and pretend play provides an opportunity for children to practice this kind of creative thinking.²⁹

How can childhood obesity be addressed?

Childhood obesity is a growing health concern with potential lifelong health consequences. Addressing the underlying challenges and capitalizing on the power of play takes individuals, organizations, communities, leaders and policy makers working together to make play possible.

What can individuals do?

Model good health habits. Adults can be positive role models for children by consuming healthy foods and drinks and living active lifestyles.

Find active family activities. Parents, mentors, and caring adults can set a positive example and incorporate physical activity in their family's regular routine by finding activities the entire family can enjoy together.

Share healthy family meals. Parents, mentors, and caring adults can involve the whole family in building healthy eating habits. Teens who regularly share meals with their families tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and are less likely to be overweight.³⁰

Help children find joy in play. Individuals can provide children opportunities for free play and encourage activities that spark joy and passion.

Learn more. Individuals can commit to learning more about obesity and how to identify if a child is overweight. Parents should talk with their child's doctor or other healthcare professional if they are concerned about their child's weight.

What can organizations and communities do?

Provide healthy food and drinks. Youth-serving organizations and schools can provide healthy food and beverage choices in all venues, including school meal programs, a la carte food services, vending machines, school stores and snack bars, fundraisers, classroom-based activities, staff and parent meetings, and out-of-school-time programs.

Implement comprehensive physical activity programs.

Schools and youth-serving organizations can provide opportunities for daily physical activity that extend beyond physical education class. This may include daily physical education, recess, classroom-based physical activity, walking or biking to school, and out-of-school time activities.

Implement employee wellness programs. Youth-serving organizations can implement employee wellness programs that include healthy eating and physical activity services for staff members. Employee wellness programs can improve staff productivity, decrease absenteeism, and decrease health care costs.³¹

Create safe spaces for play. Communities can ensure children have sufficient and equitable access to safe environments for play, such as playgrounds, recreation centers, and adequate adult supervision.

What can leaders and policy makers do?

Ensure safe environments. In addition to creating safe spaces for play, leaders and policy makers can create safe environments for active commuting by ensuring that roads and sidewalks are safe for youth to walk or bike to and from school.

Address child-focused advertising. Leaders can counter or limit advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages towards children and youth.

Expand access to nutritious foods. Leaders can address food deserts by expanding access to grocery stores offering nutritious food and by investing in affordable transportation options to help families access food.



Resources

Playworks Indiana helps kids stay active and build social and emotional skills through play. Playworks serves low-income schools through year-round, on-site support services, and reaches additional students through professional development workshops for schools and youth organizations.
<https://www.playworks.org/indiana/>

Alliance for a Healthier Indiana is a group of healthcare professionals, advocates and community and business leaders committed to making Indiana a healthier place to live and work. Obesity is one of the Alliance's five priority issues.
<https://www.healthierindiana.org/>

Indiana Healthy Weight Initiative is a coalition focused on helping to create and support policy, systems and environment changes across Indiana as they relate to nutrition, physical activity and obesity.
<http://www.indianaobesity.org/>

Active Schools is a national movement that aims to ensure that kids participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day in K-12 schools across the country. Active Schools provides resources and tools to help schools increase physical education and physical activity opportunities for kids.
<https://www.activeschoolsus.org/>

Safe Routes to School National Partnership aims to improve quality of life for kids and communities by promoting healthy living, safe infrastructure, and physical activity, starting with bicycling and walking to school and beyond. <https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/>

IYI Resources

The latest data is at your fingertips with IYI's Data Center. Search statistics and gather data to improve your program planning and grant writing or, request customized data. Go to www.iyi.org/data.

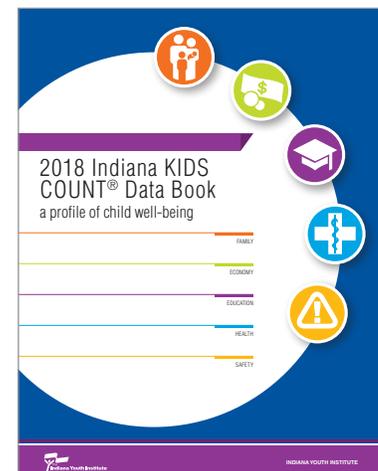
Get the most comprehensive overview of children's well-being in Indiana. **Download the Indiana KIDS COUNT Data Book** at www.iyi.org/databook.

Want in-depth information on youth? Check out the free resources at **IYI's Virginia Beall Ball Library**. We will mail you the library materials and include a postage paid return envelope. Go to www.iyi.org/library for details.

Text the word "grad" plus your or your student's high school graduation year to 69979 to receive free, grade-specific text reminders about test and application deadlines and other great tips for college and career readiness.

Looking for training on youth issues? IYI provides regional trainings and free webinars on youth development and nonprofit management. Go to <https://www.iyi.org/professional-development/trainings> for details.

Need **one-on-one assistance** with planning, evaluating, or expanding your organization? Benefit from IYI's **Consulting Services** and receive professional help at affordable hourly rates – discounted far below market value. Go to www.iyi.org/consulting-services for details.



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