Factors that Enhance Application of an Ecological Approach to Preventing Childhood Obesity

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Summary
This project increased the capability of extension nutrition and 4-H youth development professionals to apply an ecological approach to preventing childhood obesity in their communities and determined what factors enhanced that application.

Objectives
- Develop a cadre of extension 4-H and nutrition teams trained in using an ecological approach to prevent childhood obesity.
- Evaluate the course impact by measuring the extent to which an ecological approach is applied at the community level 6 months post course and determine what personal and organizational characteristics affected the application.

Methods
- Recruit and enroll teams of participants
- Deliver and facilitate 8 sessions of the online course Preventing Childhood Obesity: An Ecological Approach to teams of extension professionals and community partners
- Evaluate course sessions with pre-course, post-course and 6-month follow-up surveys

Evaluation Model

Target Audience Reached

4-H Agents
Extension Nutrition Educators
Community Partners

Target teams were 3-5 people with at least one representative from each group

Participant characteristics:
- 53% worked for Cooperative Extension
- 58% had MS or PhD degrees
- 14% were registered dietitians (RD)
- 31% had never taken an online course

8 sessions were delivered to 383 participants from 43 states (in red)
246 participants were on 75 target teams
Overall course completion rate was 88% for individuals on target teams; 75% for other individuals

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Course Model
Guided by the PRECEDE-PROCEED model, course participants assessed and prioritized behavioral, environmental, and other local factors contributing to childhood obesity in their communities.

Participants then identified specific objectives, intervention methods/strategies, action steps and evaluation methods. By course end, they had developed action plans describing collaborative, ecological approaches to preventing childhood obesity in their communities.

Application of an Ecological Approach
Factors positively associated with the application of an ecological approach (P < 0.05) were:
- placing high value on networking
- having this type of approach within their job scope
- having over 50% EFNEP funding
- having over 50% SNAP-Ed funding
- if the course content applied to the participant’s work

Factors negatively associated with the application of an ecological approach (P < 0.05) were:
- having an RD credential
- having 16 or more years of work experience

Conclusion
Training of community practitioners and the scope and funding of their positions should explicitly address the importance of networking and the use of an ecological approach.