





# Recreational Programs Rev It Up

**NRPA's Commit to Health initiative helps park and recreation agencies cultivate healthy behaviors during out-of-school time**

By Dr. Danielle Hollar

**D**uring the past two years, we've shared with you many of the exciting results experienced by kids who participated in park and recreation programs aligned with NRPA's Commit to Health initiative. We've shared how the lives of parents and park and recreation staff members have been impacted by the experience of working to improve children's health. In 2015, some modifications were made to Commit to Health's nutrition literacy component, and the subsequent results have shown the program continues to facilitate positive improvements in children's nutrition and physical activity knowledge and behaviors.

**Regarding policy recommendations for nutritious snacks, “we’ve noticed [children] cutting out chips and cheeseballs and bringing fruits now instead.”**

— Staff, Jackson, Tennessee

So, what did we learn in 2015? Below, we share the latest results of the Commit to Health initiative, as well as explain how this type of park and recreation programming makes such an incredible difference in children’s lives.

**Healthy Eating, Healthy Behaviors**

To understand the nuances of Commit to Health’s impact on children and their parents, focus groups were held in 10 cities as part of a nationwide evaluation by Healthy Networks Design and Research. Led by

NRPA Program Managers Kellie May and Allison Colman, three focus groups addressing children, parents and park and recreation staff were held in each city. Through conversations with these groups, the healthy impact of Commit to Health was illustrated, over and over again, in cases across the United States.

**The Child’s View**

Children involved in Commit to Health programming learned a lot about food, changed their eating and physical behaviors, and taught their parents to be healthier. Nutrition education — particularly fun activities like blindfolded food tastings — proved especially impactful, as did cooking lessons, classes about organs of the body, reading and creating new recipes and studying the USDA MyPlate guidelines. Children tried new foods and inculcated healthy consumption habits, reporting that they were eating new fruits and vegetables and whole grains — as well as eating according to the MyPlate recommendations — because of lessons learned at camp. They also learned that eating too much sugar is unhealthy and began drinking fewer sugar-sweetened beverages than before camp.

Many children said they

**“We took away the options to buy sodas or Gatorade and we don’t allow it on site.”**

— Staff, Jackson, Tennessee

asked their parents for certain fruits and vegetables they first tried at camp, and began asking for larger portions of fruits and vegetables, having realized they were previously not eating enough. Children requested healthier food preparations and shared new recipes learned at camp, thus having a positive impact on the health of their entire family.

Becoming advocates for their own health, participating children told their parents everyone — adults and children — needs to eat and drink less sugar, drink more water, consume fewer fast foods and cut down on the candy. They also told their parents that they need 60 minutes of exercise daily, which reportedly took many parents by surprise. Families then began taking more walks together, doing calisthenics and playing in the park.

**The Parent’s View**

Taking cues from the Commit to Health lessons brought home by their children, parents began buying more nutritious foods, preparing them in healthier ways and increasing their own physical activity levels.

Parents took their children to the grocery store to shop for nutritious foods and found it easier to convince their children to eat healthier snacks and reduce their portion sizes. Family meals included fewer processed foods, more fresh fruits and vegetables and were accompanied by tall glasses of water, rather than sugary soda.

Physical activity also increased for the entire family. Campers learned they need a minimum of 60 minutes of exercise a day, and that they should walk 10,000-14,000 steps per day — goals that parents, caregivers and children can strive to meet together through walks and playtime at their local park.





## Commit to Health Out-of-School Time (OST) Programming Is Making a Difference

As park and recreation agencies implement the core components of Commit to Health, they are playing a critical role in improving children's lives by providing access, information and experience with nutritious foods. Healthy meals served through the USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP),

paired with educational nutrition literacy opportunities offered through local

park and recreation agencies and guidelines provided by the National Afterschool Association's Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) standards, are making a major difference in the health of the nation's children.

So, how do recreation providers do it? Following are some of the lessons we've learned from

Commit to Health recreation providers during nationwide conversations in the summer of 2015.

### Creating Policies to Support Healthy Environments

Commit to Health program sites focused on creating healthy, wellness-supportive environments to facilitate health improvements among their campers and their families. As new policies were created based on the HEPA standards, recreation providers now had tools and/or rules on hand that helped them make, and enforce, real changes at OST sites. For example, food policies helped ensure nutritious foods were on-site and served as meals, and helped "ban" certain



**"The food tastes good, balanced, and it's different than last year."**

— Child, North Miami, Florida

# Committing to Healthier Youth

Thanks to funding from the Walmart Foundation, our Out-of-School Time Grantees are making big impacts in their communities. Just check out what we accomplished together in 2015.

80 grantees served  
**20 million**  
meals in 2015



**1,700,000**  
children

were provided with  
healthy meals and snacks

**153,000+**  
children



were provided nutrition literacy and education



**782**

park and rec sites across the country participated



**Handouts and activity sheets “helped the kids to remember a lot of the material they were learning.”**

— Staff, Chicago, Illinois



junk foods from recreation facilities, effectively making them “no-junk-food zones.” Relatedly, vending machines were not accessible during program times, or at least were available only in a limited manner. Other policies required certain amounts of daily physical activity. Staff repeatedly reported having policies to back them up helped them make healthy environmental changes and resulted in real health improvements among participating children.

**Guidance for Planning and Creating Nutritious OST Meals**

As mentioned above, one of the core components of Commit to Health is the provision of nutritious meals through USDA meal programs. In fact, as the graphic herein shows, 20 million meals were provided to children in 2015 at Commit to Health recreation sites! As staff planned and created menus, or worked with their meal providers and vendors on these activities, they used the HEPA meal standards as a guide. Thus, menu planners had nuanced information on how to ensure the meals were created according to very high nutritional standards — lower in sodium and added sugars, and richer in whole grains, good proteins, fruits and

vegetables. This guidance resulted in real changes to meals in OST programs that were already serving meals, and helped those starting up summer and afterschool meal programs plan and create menus in the most nutritious way possible.

Children recognized the meal changes and appreciated the variety of foods provided — some even recognized their nutrition lessons in the meals served to them. “Everything seemed to fall into a MyPlate category,” one child recalled of his experiential food education in Jackson, Tennessee.

**“Learning how to prepare the meals helps them feel independent and then they can do it at home.”**

— Staff, Tallahassee, Florida


**Leading Nutrition Literacy Programming**

The Commit to Health Nutrition Literacy program comprises a multifaceted set of educational activities and tools that engage children and adults in fun, experiential health promotion activities. In 2015, lessons and associated recommended activities were provided by NRPA to recreation providers according to grade level (K-2 and grades 3-5) and topic. Many nutrition literacy items provided in 2015 were free and available for download. The food lessons taught were also translated into the home as children requested that their parents buy and prepare new foods tasted at camp. Similarly, gardening education and planting activities led by recreation providers instilled confidence in many children, who then encouraged their families to plant gardens.

Integrating tools from the USDA MyPlate program ramped up nutrition literacy efforts in 2015. These were mentioned by recreation providers as a “key success” of the educational program that helped children recognize proteins, grains, fruits, veggies and dairy.

**Developing Physical Activity Guidelines**

The focus on physical activity that is central to Commit to Health led park and recreation staff members to be more targeted in their leadership of this component. Some recreation sites created a focus on indoor physical activity offerings that they did not provide in the past, which created opportunities for staying active



**One child described teaching his parents “how to be healthier by eating fruit and drinking lots of water.”**

— Child, Tallahassee, Florida



**Parents “started making grilled chicken instead of fried chicken and turkey dogs instead of hot dogs on the request of their kids after the staff brought these healthy options to a grillout for the kids.”**

— Staff, Tallahassee, Florida

despite extreme heat or rain. As part of HEPA policies, some camp sites banned electronics, including cell phones, with the aim to reduce sedentary behavior. Recreation personnel indicated that fitness improved thanks to the direction provided in Commit to Health physical activity programming and the focus on reducing screen time.

With help from the Nutrition Literacy program, staff members reported that they had the confidence to act as health educators and, thus, were able to convince children to eat more healthily and to be more active. They observed improved behaviors among their campers as they put education into action and attributed the health improvements to the engaging, experiential Nutrition Literacy program structure and tools, and to the fact that it was integrated into physical activity programming and other typical camp activities.

#### **New for 2016**

NRPA is excited to announce an addition to the Commit to Health Nutrition Literacy program for 2016! Based on impressive results regarding eating behavior changes due to food-based educational and experiential activities, a new Foods of the Month program ([www.nrpa.org/commit-to-health-foods-of-the-month](http://www.nrpa.org/commit-to-health-foods-of-the-month)) has been created as the cornerstone of nutrition literacy for

2016. The new program, created specifically for NRPA by Healthy Networks Design and Research, takes a thematic approach to teaching and disseminating information about two nutrient-rich foods each month. Through posters, newsletters, activities and coloring sheets — as well as experiential learning recommendations for food-based art projects, tasting events, cooking demonstrations and growing Foods of the Month at recreation sites and/or in home gardens — children, parents and park staff will learn what is special about these

foods, why they should consume them and how to grow and/or prepare them.

In addition to the Foods of the Month program, USDA MyPlate materials and recommendations for daily physical activity are included in the revved-up nutrition literacy efforts for 2016. Check out the materials, organized by grade level (K-2, 3-5) and topic and provided free for download, at [www.nrpa.org/commit-to-health-foods-of-the-month](http://www.nrpa.org/commit-to-health-foods-of-the-month).

Commit to Health programming during OST is making a difference in the health and well-being of children. For more information, visit [www.nrpa.org/committohealth](http://www.nrpa.org/committohealth). 🌱

**Children “are eating healthier at home and they are having parents buy healthier produce from the grocery store instead of sweets.”**

— Staff, Jackson, Tennessee

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