CHAMPS—Children's Healthy Activities Mentoring Program for Schools

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Introduction

This paper outlines the planning, partnership implementation and outcomes of the CHAMPS program. It was developed using an action research model and is underpinned by Health Promoting Schools Framework and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

Rationale

Childhood obesity in Australia is now affecting 20–38% or 1 in 4 of our children, frighteningly increasing at a rate of 1% each year. (1) “Over weight or obese children are more likely to remain obese. Research indicates 80% of obese adolescents will become obese adults.” (2).

We know that increased consumption of high sugar, high fat processed foods and drinks and a decrease in physical activity are the main contributors to an obesity epidemic sweeping the nation. (1).

Clever marketing and busy lifestyles have encouraged families to focus on convenience and normalise more regular purchase of take away and snack foods, which tend to be high in fat, sugar and salt and low in fibre and nutrients.(1). “Australian National Nutrition Survey (NNS) indicated that 33% of energy for 2–7 year olds was derived from snack items (cakes, pastries, crisps and sweet drinks) rather than from core foods (bread, cereals, fruit and vegetables and dairy products)” (3). On the day of the survey, 30% of 2–7 year olds ate no fruit and a similar proportion ate no vegetables. (4)

In addition increased portion sizes encourages people to continue eating long after they are satiated, thus reducing their ability over time to recognise when they are full. This further increases the intake of high energy, low nutrient foods further contributing to weight gain and associated lifestyle diseases. (1).

Increasing inactivity in children is compounding this weight gain. Increased screen time (video, TV, computer games) often for than 6–8 hours a day, increased urbanisation and traffic on the roads has meant that children have less opportunity to roam. Parents tend to drive their children to and from school and other activities in response to concerns about their safety issues. (1).

While children are getting fatter, they are at increasingly younger ages becoming more aware of their body shape and size. (5). Children between 6 and 7 years rate their ideal figure as significantly thinner than their actual shape. (6). Research indicates fat body shapes are often labelled lazy, less intelligent, socially isolated and unhealthy. (7).

The resulting body dissatisfaction and low self esteem can lead to dieting and other weight control practices which can contribute to weight gain and obesity or the development of eating disorders. (8).

The incidence of disordered eating in children is rising with over one third of 7–12 year old girls trying to lose weight mostly through dieting whereas boys more frequently use exercise as a way of losing weight. (9).

Our relationship with food has become more and more complex, with more people over weight, over fed and undernourished and more people trying to lose weight. Many people are gaining weight as a result of fad dieting, or developing eating or body image disorders. Children and young people are now developing lifestyle related diseases that were once diseases occurring in middle age.

Consumerism has devalued and undermined our ability to understand our own health needs as individuals.
The Children’s Healthy Activities Mentoring Program for Schools (CHAMPS) aims to provide students with tools to critically assess how they are living now and take control of their health choices. This program takes the focus away from isolating obese children as the ‘problem,’ and puts childhood obesity into a social context, recognising the complexity of our relationship with food, our bodies and our changing world.

We know good health is a lifelong journey of habits and attitudes which support a healthy lifestyle. It is where we make choices to care for our well-being, based on self awareness and self respect, recognising the inevitability of change and adaptability as an essential life skill. CHAMPS uses the holistic model of health as a framework to explore these themes and engages students, the school community and health organisations in promoting the development of healthy lifestyle habits and choices.

The program aims to encourage students to help others, ‘where students are encouraged to develop as people capable of “taking an increasing responsibility for their own physical well-being, learning, relationships with others and their role in the local national and global community.”’ Victorian Essential Learning standards. (VELS) (12)

CHAMPS has been developed using three key models

- the social model of health
- health promoting schools framework
- the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

The social model of health sees the determinants of an individual’s health status as social as well as individual, and a range of social and environmental factors be seen as impacting on the health of both individuals and the broader community (Wilkinson & Marmot, 1998). It acknowledges and embraces the rich variety of lifestyles and human experience within our communities and the importance of supporting and nourishing a strong sense of connection and belonging for people living in them.

Upper Hume Community Health (UHCHS) works within the social model of health and recognises health as a complete state of physical, social, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being and not just the absence of disease. (WHO 1986) (10)

Health Promoting Schools Framework


The VELS, Health and Physical Education domain “ focuses on factors including nutrition, healthy eating and healthy lifestyle practices, which promote and protect the physical, mental, social and emotional health of individuals and families.” (12)

VELS Civic and Citizenship domain encourages senior students to “explore ways they can actively participate in their school and community. With teacher support they experience class and school leadership roles and their responsibilities.” (12)
Planning and development

CHAMPS was developed as a pilot by UHCHS and Beechworth Primary School (BPS). Both parties recognised a common commitment to the holistic and social models of health. They planned to develop a tool which could provide relevant, repeated and multi-layered opportunities for students to recognise the importance of developing healthy lifestyle choices, and what they could do to promote healthy lifestyle within their school community. Consultation with the school principal and classroom teachers enabled UHCHS staff to understand the themes that would be most useful to include in the program.

Using an action research model, UHCHS, developed the program so that it would be a tool available for other school and health services.

The program provides information for staff, parents and students and value adds to activities and programs supporting the promotion of healthy lifestyles in a way which is relevant and meaningful to the school curriculum and the school community.

Aim

To promote healthy lifestyle choices for primary school students.

Objectives

The program objectives are to:

- to support students to develop healthy lifestyle goals
- to empower students to mentor sustainable lifestyle change within the school community
- to support the students to identify future health promotion activities within the school community

Strategies

The strategies focus on three main groups—teachers, parent and students.

Teachers

A one off professional development session provides information about holistic health, data about the prevalence, causes and impact of childhood obesity and body image disorders, and information about what schools and parents can do to promote the healthy lifestyle message. Handout information is supplied, including relevant websites. Teachers update their knowledge about obesity, reflect and discuss the role schools can play in the promotion of healthy lifestyles. This session informs their planning for other related curriculum activities, which can further augment the CHAMPS program and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Parents

Provision of Healthy Lifestyle Information for parents. Parents are informed about the activities the students will be involved in via the CHAMPS program via the school newsletter. Further newsletter articles are provided during the seven week period of CHAMPS, including information about how parents can support their children developing a healthy lifestyle.

At the end of the seven week program, parents are invited to attend the Community Information session, along with the rest of the school community. At this session students present their findings from the Lunchbox and Physical Activity audits, their project activities and their recommendations. UHCHS present a short information session about the incidence, causes and impact of childhood obesity and body image disorders and outlines what families and schools can do to support children developing healthy lifestyle habits. There is also information available promoting healthy lifestyle, healthy lunch box and snack options, with samples provided to taste.
Students

Prior to commencement of the program students participate in a lunch box audit and physical activity audit over a one week period. The lunchbox audit measures the level of healthy lunches the class consumes on any given day. A physical activity audit is conducted over a week and enables students to reflect on their level of physical activity. Students fill in their audits anonymously. The audits are collated as a class activity.

These set a baseline which can be used to compare any changes which may occur as a result of the program. The audits are repeated during the last week of CHAMPS and the results compared to see if there has been any change as a result of the program.

Healthy Lifestyle Information sessions

The program comprises of seven 35 minute sessions.

- **Session 1: Pre evaluation**—Students complete a pre evaluation, which explores, their understanding of health, its importance, perceived barriers and what they plan to do to stay healthy. Using the holistic model of health as a framework students learn about this model and explore what they can do to keep themselves healthy and set some personal goals.

- **Session 2: Why Do We Eat?** Students explore the complex nature of our relationship with food. The session aims to raise awareness of a whole range of common behaviours around food, including the pleasure, rituals and enjoyment associated with food.

- **Session 3: Body Image**—Students explore their perceptions about body image and the sorts of messages they get about being a boy or a girl. They plan what things they can do to support feeling good about who they are.

- **Session 4: How I Live Now and How We Lived in the Olden Days**—Students explore and compare the lifestyle of people 100 or more years ago with how we live now. Using critical thinking they consider the challenges and helpful aspects for both times.

- **Session 5: What’s in Our Food?** Guest Speaker—Dietician explores food groups ie plant and animal based foods, promoting higher intake of plant based foods. Students are involved in activities where they learn about what constitutes a balanced, healthy diet for their age group and explore the food labels of some common foods.

- **Session 6: Rainbow of Colour**—Encourages students to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption. Activities explore the concept of the wide range of colour of fruits and vegetables, promoting consumption of a wide variety of foods.

- **Session 7: Physical activity**—students explore the different sorts of physical activity available and brainstorm the benefits of physical activity. Reflecting on their pre evaluation they complete the post evaluation.

- **Session 8: Community Information Session**—students plan the advertising and running of this event. This session provides students with an opportunity to show case their audit results and project work as part of a parent information session. The students plan and develop the invitations and facilitate the event, with support of Teachers and Community Health Staff.

- **Session 9: Where to From Here?** Students discuss the results of the pre and post evaluations and feedback from the community information session. Students brainstorm recommendations outlining how they believe the school could continue to support healthy lifestyles and what they could do to mentor healthy lifestyles for the student population.
Outcomes

Objective 1. Support students to develop healthy lifestyle goals

Beechworth Primary School—The pre-evaluation clearly indicated that students knew that eating healthy food and being active contributes to being healthy. A number recognised that being healthy allowed them to do what they wanted to do. However many found ‘junk’ foods most palatable and acknowledged they could have a more balanced diet. The CHAMPS program further informed students about healthy food choices and what they could do to support a healthy lifestyle.

The information below outlines the results from the students post evaluation—“the two most important things they learnt from the program” were

- 48% healthy food
- 7% that breakfast was important
- 41% recognised the importance of exercise
- 34% had learnt about the foods they should eat less
- 14% said they should drink more water
- 36% said they would eat more vegetables
- 11% suggested they would drink more water
- 16% said they would reduce their viewing time

Students identified the following changes to their behaviour following the program;

- 42% had increased the consumption of healthy foods
- 9% said they were eating less junk food

As a result of the CHAMPS program, the school reported that more students brought healthy lunches and snack choices to school, and more children ate breakfast.

The following pie chart demonstrates the lack of physical activity students participated in prior to the project.

![Pie chart]

Before and After School Activities for One Week

- 66% television
- 15% Other physical activity
- 3% sport
- 16% Computer, X-boy, gameboy
As a result of CHAMPS, all students decided to increase their physical activity, this was demonstrated as follows:

- 55% walk and run more,
- 41% participation in sport,
- 11% walking home from school and
- 16% riding their bikes to school.

**Objective 2—empower students to mentor sustainable lifestyle goals within the school community**

Student recommendations gave the school a clear understanding of what students felt could improve health outcomes for the whole school community. These recommendations then informed school decision and policy direction.

Student recommendations include:

- increased physical activity opportunities at school
- more sports equipment
- healthy lunch options on canteen list
- healthy lunch and snack recipe book
- modelling healthy lifestyles—speaking at assembly, including junior students in activities, eating healthy food around others
- students decided they could play a part in encouraging less active students to participate in lunchtime tabloid sports activities.
- school garden
- students to generate health information for school
- CHAMPS throughout school.

The following is a breakdown of the analysis of Student recommendations:

- 65% of students identified physical activity options as what their school could do to help them stay healthy, including activity everyday, more equipment, sport competitions at lunch time and recess
- 39% felt they could help other students through setting up activities ensuring they were games that could include all.
- 15% felt they should set a good example ie eating healthy food around others.

Recommendations enacted by school are:

- a handball court was established
- fruit is now provided in the class room
- a school vegetable patch (organic garden) has been established
- a healthy calendar with healthy recipes was developed and made available for purchase by the school and wider community
- Healthy Lifestyle brochures were developed by the students and distributed to 150 student families.
- policy allowing students to drink water and eat fresh fruit/vegetables as brain food during class time.
Parents/school community

Post evaluation from the information session found that parents were especially impressed with the students driving the process and with their research and presentations. They found the UHCHS presentation, useful in understanding the research, reasoning and recommended strategies regarding healthy lifestyles. All parents attending the session decided to enact a range of strategies including limiting screen time, encouraging their children to eat more fruit and vegetables, whole grain bread and drink more water.

School curriculum

Beechworth Primary School used CHAMPS to value add to their existing curriculum activities supporting healthy lifestyle. Projects contributing to the Community Information session occurred in the Maths, Science, English and Art classes. The school developed a protocol and policy to allow students to drink water and eat fruit/vegetables at any time throughout the school day.

Students were encouraged to develop good self esteem and an understanding of their learning needs through the implementation of Program Achieve and the Learning to Learn Program and access to a range of programs, information and supports available from within the school or from community and other relevant health organisations.

CHAMPS supported the school’s commitment to Activity for All, where the students decided they could play a part in encouraging less active students to participate in lunchtime tabloid sports activities.

Healthy Lifestyles was the theme for “Earn and Learn”, a hands on curriculum integrated unit of work, where students develop small businesses as a way of exploring the fundamentals of economics, the relationship between spending and resource use, budgeting, banking and learning how to co-operate with others to contribute to the achievement of the group goals. One of the businesses developed an organic garden, the supermarket supplied fresh produce for the two fresh juice businesses and other food outlets trialled healthy recipes and sought feedback. The feedback determined the recipes to be used for the calendar. Another business developed a gym and provided activities promoting fitness and flexibility. The Earn and Learn program will be run every second year with the Grade 5 and 6 students.

Objective 3—Support the students to identify future health promotion activities within the school community

- Healthy Lifestyle brochures were developed by the students and distributed to the 150 student families. These included a range of flyers promoting physical activity, healthy eating, with breakfast and lunchbox suggestions.

- A healthy calendar with healthy recipes was developed. This calendar was made available to the community for purchase. From the 200 copies printed 15 remain unsold.

- Students as a result of CHAMPS participated in a whole school litter free lunch and provided information for the school newsletter promoting healthy food choices.

- Grade 5 and 6 students, teachers and UHCHS planned and delivered a whole school healthy lunch as part of Rural Health Week.

Recommendations

Program—action research

As a result of the experiences and feedback from BPS the program has been reviewed and adapted. The adaptations include:

- inclusion of a section using Global Self Esteem, Burnett Self Scale in the Pre and post evaluation, to ensure we were able to capture information about student’s perceptions of their body image. (13)
• lunchbox and physical activity audits conducted at the beginning and again at the end of the program.

• inclusion of a feedback form for teachers providing information about benefits, relevance and any recommendations, at the conclusion of the program

• inclusion of a session promoting a wide variety of colour of fruits and vegetables

• inclusion of a specific session exploring body image and self esteem, and this theme continued throughout the program.

This program was recently run at St Joseph’s Primary School, Beechworth.

Given the success of the CHAMPS program, our aim over the next two years is to:

• promote and deliver the reviewed CHAMPS program to the primary schools in the Upper Hume region

• resource and support health services to deliver the CHAMPS program within their local communities

• evaluate the experiences and program outcomes to ensure the ongoing quality and sustainability.

Conclusion

The CHAMPS partnership enabled the development of a tool which reflected and utilised the common philosophies, skills and resources of the Community Health and the Education sectors. As a result, the program provides a ready made, hands-on tool, which gives schools a concrete framework to base their curriculum activities promoting healthy lifestyle. “This is based on a concept that inextricably links health and learning, believes health is needed for living and health promotion is a core business for schools.” (11)

CHAMPS looks at the issue of obesity from a holistic and social context. In a strength based way, the program empowers students to own their healthy lifestyle choices and recognise the role they can play in teaching others within their school. It takes the focus away from identifying obese children as the problem, reducing the risk of their stigmatisation. CHAMPS normalises diversity, and encourages students to find out what works best for them in creating a healthy lifestyle.

This based on the knowledge that children can be happy and healthy at a variety of sizes and weights. Their bodies will assume their natural weight when “given a healthy diet and a meaningful level of physical activity.” (13)

CHAMPS provides opportunities for students, parents and teachers to communicate about what they can do to support healthy lifestyles. This has resulted in a strong sense of ownership and for this reason the school has continued to build on their learning and CHAMPS continues to be a relevant resource.

In conclusion, CHAMPS has been designed as a collaborative tool, to be used:

• as work units/lesson plans

• to inform health curriculum development and cross-curricula activities

• to support planning for whole of school health promoting activities

• to support informed policy development and planning.
Bibliography


13. Burnett, P. Burnett self scale, global self esteem subscale, 1994,


Presenter

Paula Mobach is currently employed by Upper Hume Community Health Service and has worked as a Community Health Promotion Worker for over 10 years. Paula trained and practised as a registered nurse and midwife. She has been involved in community development and change management within the community. Paula practices the principles of the Ottawa Charter and uses a strength-based approach as a foundation for her work practice.