



Healthy Kids **Healthy Childcare**

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

After 28 years operating a childcare center in Belen, Sandra Baca was looking for a way to get her students more active. She talked with her younger sister, who owns a childcare center in Los Lunas, about creating an activity competition between the two centers. Then they learned about the Healthy Kids Healthy Childcare Challenge at a statewide nutrition training.

“We were so excited to have someone who could help us and encourage us,” said Baca, owner and director of Wright Choice in Belen.

Healthy Kids Healthy Childcare (HKHCC), which is supported by the New Mexico Department of Health and New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD), began in 2012. HKHCC introduces childcare providers to five key goals to improve the health of preschoolers:

- *Increase physical activity, including outside play*
- *Eliminate screen time*
- *Serve fruits and vegetables at every meal*
- *Provide access to water throughout the day*
- *Support breastfeeding for moms*



“What we’re finding in BMI (body-mass index) results with elementary students is 13 to 14 percent of children are walking in the front door of kindergarten obese,” said Rita Condon, Healthy Kids New Mexico program manager at the Department of Health. “We wanted to move our work into the childcare setting to shape behavior earlier and then continue to work with students in elementary school.”

Healthy Kids New Mexico’s goal is to make it easier for people to choose healthy food and be active in their communities. To reach young children and their families, Healthy Kids and CYFD traveled around New Mexico talking with facilities and registered homes about HKHCC goals of improving health.

The following year, Healthy Kids collaborated with CYFD to create a four-week challenge as a way to kick start childcare centers and homes into fostering healthy habits at a young age.

Baca and her sister started immediately on the Healthy Kids Healthy Childcare Challenge, which involves the following steps:

- Attend a four-hour Healthy Kids Healthy Childcare Challenge Training
- Develop a four-week planning calendar and track classroom physical activity and screen time
- Provide parent education about moving more and spending less time in front of a screen at home
- Increase physical activity to 120 minutes a day (*double the state requirement*)
- Reduce screen time per week to 30 minutes or less



Baca didn't have to reduce screen time because she doesn't offer her students television or computer time. She and her staff care for 70 children, ages 6 weeks to 12 years. To start the challenge, she established an hour of physical activity both in the morning and afternoon. Kids moved in all kinds of ways -- lunges, skips, ladder steps, monkey bars, runs, walks and kicks. If the afternoons were too hot to be outside, Baca developed creative ways of moving indoors like kids walking on strips of tape to practice balance.

"We do everything possible to keep them busy," Baca said.



Baca took the Challenge a step further by discussing healthy foods through books and songs. Children picked vegetables at a nearby farm and planted their own pot of such produce as squash, watermelon, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots or peppers. Each child brought three food items from home so the class could talk about what is healthy and why.

Baca hears children give their dolls healthy food during dramatic play. They talk more about ingredients in food. Parents say their children request healthy snacks now. Beyond that, the Challenge brought children together in a fun, dynamic way.

"The kids are happier, the parents are happier," Baca said. "The kids are more encouraged to come to childcare. It's teaching them teamwork because we have bigger kids helping the younger kids. It's teaching them compassion and patience."

Introducing healthier foods in childcare settings is coming at a perfect time, since federal guidelines for meals served in licensed childcare facilities and homes are getting stricter,

as they are for school children. Meals will need to have less sodium, fat and sugars, said Pam Mitchell, CYFD’s nutrition manager for the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

CYFD works with childcare directors to make sure they are following the meal pattern requirements if the federal government reimburses them for food. CYFD is already connected with childcare centers and homes, so it was a natural fit for Healthy Kids to partner with the agency to conduct joint trainings, offer activity tips and provide incentives for each successful week of the challenge.

“I think it’s great that we are both working hand-in-hand so we can reach out to more children and help them,” Mitchell said. “We want to continue with this endeavor and get our childhood obesity issue under control and our kids a lot healthier.”

Condon said the partnership should be a model for how programs and agencies could work together in state government. *“So many of us are working on the same issues for similar populations,”* she said. *“It’s better to work together and have more impact. We want people to not feel like this is more work for them and feel supported to make their place healthier for kids.”*

Engaging the parents is another significant component of the HKHCC Challenge. Baca kept parents informed throughout the challenge and gave parents ingredients to make different healthy dishes to share with the students.

“I definitely think if we can get the educational piece to parents and teachers that we need to get up and moving and we need to eat nutritionally so we can be healthier, then we’re going to have less diabetes we see because of children and adults being overweight,” Mitchell said. “Healthy lifestyle behaviors are going to be learned and continued hopefully so they have a lifelong history of healthiness.”



At the conclusion of the Challenge, Healthy Kids will provide childcare providers with certificate awards and recognition at their annual conference. Along the way, Healthy Kids gave providers stickers, posters, books and educational videos as incentives to acknowledge their progress.

Condon is compiling results of the Challenge based on childcare directors tracking their students’ activities. Baca said parents reported to her that children were sleeping better, waking up happier and trying more foods.

“I am just glad Healthy Kids came and did this. My sister and I have talked about this for awhile, but it’s hard on your own,” she said. “It just makes me happy to try to help these kids.”

Many people are introduced to Healthy Kids Healthy Childcare through the Challenge, but that’s just the beginning of the initiative to get children to move more and increase the fruits and vegetables they eat while they are at childcare.

Condon is figuring out the next steps for Healthy Kids Healthy Childcare. Considering the upcoming change to federal requirements for meals, HKHCC may help CYFD provide technical assistance and training on how to provide children healthy foods they will eat.

“The ultimate vision is for children to have access to opportunities to eat healthy foods and get plenty of physical activity where they live, learn and play, and that they are being challenged and stretched to have the best life possible while they are in childcare with plenty of opportunities for indoor and outdoor play,” Condon said.