

NEWS RELEASE

Media Contacts: Robin Moore, 919/515-8344 or robin_moore@ncsu.edu
Sherry McIntyre, College of Design, 919/515-8311 or
sherry_mcintyre@ncsu.edu
Chad Austin, News Services, 919/515-3470 or
chad_austin@ncsu.edu

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Obesity Prevention Project Will Examine Effectiveness of Preschoolers' Play Areas

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

With rates of obesity among children rising, a research team headed by a North Carolina State University design professor hopes a new project will help stimulate physical activity and promote healthy habits among preschoolers.

The project aims to prevent obesity by modifying preschool play areas in child-care centers and is funded by a \$275,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health. Under the direction of Robin Moore, professor of landscape architecture at NC State, researchers from NC State's College of Design, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Public Health and the Emory University School of Public Health will work to develop a tool to measure how effective outdoor play spaces are in generating physical activity in children.

According to national statistics from the Centers for Disease Control, the percentage of young people who are overweight has tripled since 1980. Among children and teens aged 6-19, 16 percent, or more than 9 million young people, are considered overweight.

"Our project is focused on young children and emphasizes prevention rather than trying to correct health problems when the child becomes a teenager," says Moore, who is an internationally recognized authority on children's play spaces and the impact they have on learning. "We are not only measuring physical activity, but how specific environmental components support children's activity."

During the course of the project, researchers will observe and assess outdoor play environments at 25 child-care facilities across North Carolina. Researchers will examine which components found in outdoor play spaces enhance or inhibit physical activity among 3- to 5-year-olds.

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“We want to explore the relationship between children’s behavior and their physical environment,” Moore says. “We’re focusing specifically on child-care centers because that’s where young children are spending the majority of their time. This is an environment that children are occupying five days a week for up to 10 hours per day year round.”

Based on its observations and analysis, the team will develop an assessment tool that will help gauge the levels of physical activity in an outdoor play area. Currently, Moore says, no such tool exists. Once developed, the instrument will be able to help identify various elements that should be included in outdoor play environments to spark physical activity.

Moore says the majority of outdoor play spaces consist of manufactured equipment and little natural landscape. Other research shows that natural outdoor environments stimulate more physical activity and exercise in children, he says. In turn, preschoolers who spend more time playing outdoors are likely to continue doing so when they reach grade school.

Moore has served as a consultant to various cities in the United States and abroad in the design and development of municipal parks, child-care and elementary school outdoor play areas, and children’s gardens in zoos and botanical gardens. He has authored several books on the topic of outdoor play and learning environments. Moore is also director of the Natural Learning Initiative, a research and extension program of the College of Design, which seeks to help communities create play and educational spaces that promote healthy levels of activity and creative learning among children.