Abstract

Obesity is a serious medical condition that affects children worldwide. In the United States, childhood overweight and obesity rates have tripled since 1980 resulting in a prevalence of 17.1% and 16.5%, respectively (Garasky et al., 2009). Currently, South Carolina is the 8th ranked obese state in the United States with a 29.1% childhood overweight or obesity prevalence. In particular, 34.4% of children residing in Spartanburg county of South Carolina are either overweight or obese.

A higher energy intake and lower energy output leads to weight gain, thus resulting in overweight or obese conditions over time. Increased sedentary behaviors, such as television viewing, and decreased physical activities as well overeating, soft drink consumption, and excessive calorie and fat intake have been identified as the major contributors to childhood obesity. Childhood overweight and obesity has become a critical health-related issue because it has been attributed to the development of secondary diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. But, through proper nutrition, fat and sugar intake, physical activity, and overall lifestyle, obesity is a preventable disease.

It is so important that children learn early to make healthy choices and limit their caloric intake to the sufficient amount for their bodies. Nearly every child attends a public or private school, at least through adolescence, and therefore, schools are favorable environments in which to deliver health programming (Sahota et al., 2001). In this study, experimenters targeted a local elementary school and implemented a program to instill intrinsic reward for balanced lunch choices. The cost-free, non-intrusive, and sustainable reward program produced increases in healthy food selection and decreases in flavored milk consumption, demonstrating that when given education and encouragement, children tend to improve their dietary habits.