

Youth empowerment program can prevent childhood obesity

August 1 2019



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A first-of-its-kind study had Worcester youths create their own narratives about reducing sugary drink consumption, successfully leading to behavior changes and preventing excess weight gain.

A new [pilot study](#) led by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researchers is the first to use youth-produced narratives to

empower youth to reduce [sugary drink consumption](#) and obesity risk. In the study, published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, participants in the [pilot program](#) at the Boys and Girls Club (BGC) of Worcester and their parents consumed fewer sugary drinks and more water over a six-month period than children and parents at a demographically-similar BGC in a nearby city.

"Youth created their own narratives around why it was important for them—not their parents, teachers, or researchers like myself—to change the types of beverages they were [drinking](#)," says study lead author Dr. Monica Wang, assistant professor of community health sciences at BUSPH. "This type of empowerment strategy recognizes youth as experts in their own lives, and may be particularly engaging for youth of color."

After a training from Wang and her colleagues, BGC staff in the pilot study led an ethnically diverse group of nine- to twelve-year-old youths in activities that promoted replacing sugar-sweetened beverages with water, including blind taste tests of flavored water, a corner store scavenger hunt, and role play skits about ways to drink water and what to do when tempted by sugary drinks. The staff also guided the participants in creating written, audio, and video narratives to promote replacing sugar-sweetened beverages with water and provide strategies for doing so. The youths then taught their parents or guardians what they had learned each week, shared their narratives, and led a culminating BGC community event at the end of the six-week program.

"Most obesity prevention programs target multiple behaviors, but we found that a youth empowerment program targeting one dietary behavior could prevent obesity risk among youth," Wang says. "Reducing [sugary drinks](#) through [youth](#) empowerment may be a promising starting point for families to engage in additional healthy eating efforts down the road."

Wang notes that 12 BGCs have expressed interest in the program for a future, larger-scale study.

More information: Monica L. Wang et al, Reducing sugary drink intake through youth empowerment: results from a pilot-site randomized study, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s12966-019-0819-0](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-019-0819-0)

Provided by Boston University School of Medicine

Citation: Youth empowerment program can prevent childhood obesity (2019, August 1) retrieved 30 December 2022 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-08-youth-empowerment-childhood-obesity.html>

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