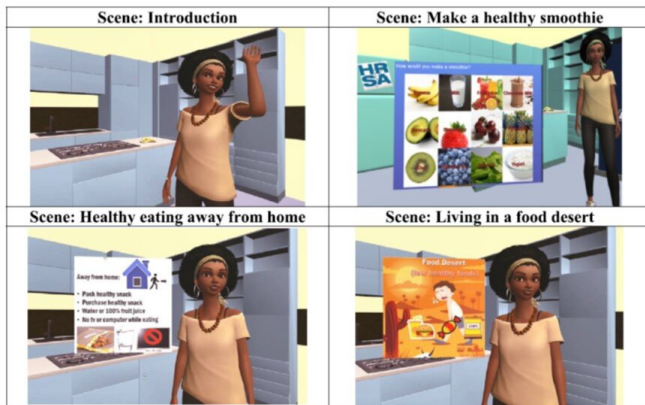


Virtual avatar coaching with community context for adult-child dyads

8 March 2021



Selected scenes of the virtual reality avatar experience seen by participants. Credit: *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*

Virtual reality avatar-based coaching shows promise to increase access to and extend the reach of nutrition education programs to children at risk for obesity, according to a new study in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

Researchers introduced 15 adult-child dyads to a virtual avatar-based coaching program that incorporated age-specific information on growth; physical, social, and [emotional development](#); [healthy lifestyles](#); common nutrition concerns; and interview questions around eating behaviors and [food resources](#) and counseling.

"We developed a virtual reality avatar computer program as a way to get kids engaged in learning about [nutrition education](#). The goal was to make this a program that could work to prevent [childhood obesity](#)," said lead investigator Jared T. McGuirt, Ph.D., MPH, Department of Nutrition, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA. "We were primarily interested in how kids and parents reacted to this program—particularly lower income kids and parents who may not have

been able to access this kind of experience in the past."

A key finding in the study was the avatar's ability to spark dialogue between the children and adults around dietary habits and behavior. All children and adults reported liking the program and planned to use it in the future, as they found it fun, informational, and motivating. The personalized social aspect of the avatar experience was appealing, as participants thought the avatar would reinforce guidance and provide support while acting as a cue to change health behaviors.

Looking to future implementation of this program in the public health field, Dr. McGuirt noted: "We feel we have a good start. The program was designed so others can build on it, and hopefully advance this technique into community nutrition education programs.

More information: "Virtual Avatar Coaching With Community Context for Adult-Child Dyads With Low Income," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2020.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2020.12.004)

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