

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER ASSOCIATION'S DISCOVER: CATCH EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

To tackle obesity, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) Association focused on one simple premise: ***it's much easier to create good health habits than it is to change bad ones.***

JCCs consider health and wellness inherent to their tradition and cultural values; staying healthy and taking care of their bodies is an aspect of respecting their faith, making healthy living part of their heritage.

Three years ago, the JCC Association partnered with the University of Texas School of Public Health and its Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) Program. Together, they created Discover: CATCH Early Childhood, a child wellness program aimed at encouraging healthy habits in the youngest members of the community and their families.

JCC Association's version of Discover: CATCH is based on a foundation of Jewish values. The evidence-based model that CATCH has pioneered attempts to instill an appreciation for physical activity in children ages 3 to 5 and encourages them to develop life-long healthy eating habits. As part of the program, children learn to have fun while exercising. They are also taught to differentiate between "go" foods, which are good for them and "whoa" foods that are less healthy.

The program is focused on young children, but it seeks to engage the adults in their lives, including parents and educators. The JCC Association has created a series of parent tip sheets to bring lessons home and help the entire family think more carefully about food, nutrition and exercise. The model positions JCCs as a wellness provider to the community. JCCs have been able to reach families with older children as well by incorporating Discover: CATCH into teen after-school programs.

While the Discover: CATCH program is just finishing the final stages of the pilot phase, the responses across the board have been positive. Based on surveys sent to members before and after the program began, there has been a cultural shift in the way early childhood classes are being taught. For instance, young children no longer play "elimination games" (such as Duck, Duck, Goose) where a large portion of children are not participating at any given time. Children are also growing their own fruits and vegetables for snacks.

The pilot communities are also seeing a change in how early childhood educators and staff work with parents. Parents are sending healthier

foods with their children and asking schools to serve healthier foods. Encouraged by these results, JCC Association added an education piece on farming and farm-to-table initiatives.

In November 2010, JCC Association started "JCC Grows" to encourage JCCs to establish gardens and encourage members to support fresh food projects and be physically active. A significant portion of the harvests from the gardens are donated to local food pantries.

The JCC Movement also has one of the largest networks of day and resident camps in North America. Since starting their partnership with Discover: CATCH, camps have gotten rid of the old "bug juice and greasy grilled cheese" in favor of healthier food, some of which comes from their own gardens.

Health and Wellness at Local JCCs

The **Shaw Jewish Community Center** in Akron, Ohio held a Discover: CATCH Wellness Fair on January 22, 2012. More than 1,000 people took part and learned about all different aspects of health and wellness.

Discover: CATCH was a natural complement to the Shaw JCC's Ethical Start Early Childhood Program. According to Lisa Pesantez, who teaches a group of two-year olds and a class of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders, "For my [two-year olds] I think the biggest thing has been showing them that exercising can be fun! I believe that the purpose is to give wholeness and completeness to physical activity, spirituality, and nutrition for both the students and the teachers."

The **Asheville Jewish Community Center** in North Carolina took the JCC Grows initiative and created an entire Jewish Children's Garden Curriculum. They started by forming a volunteer committee of parents and interested teaching staff with garden design, art therapy and Judaic experience.

The Asheville JCC is in a busy downtown area with just two narrow grassy areas (one 20' x 70' and the other 20' x 25') which became their children's garden. The community helped fund the garden through a Children's Garden Legacy Campaign, which offered naming opportunities for each section. The JCC also solicited volunteers to help build the garden, including a teen youth group, preschool teachers, parents, landscapers, gardeners, and many others. The garden provides healthy foods for the entire community and educational opportunities for children.