**“**Preschoolers Jump-Start on a Healthy Lifestyle

in the Tri-County Area of Maryland’s Lower Eastern Shore”

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This research project is a qualitative study which attempts to understand childhood obesity from a socio-ecological perspective. The goal is to improve the teaching strategies used to promote healthy lifestyle among low-income parents with children. As part of an assembled a team of well qualified researchers, practitioners, and educators who have answered the call for action to develop a research proposal that will study the incidence of childhood obesity, my role specifically is to analyze the impact of familial & social factors on children’s dietary behaviors and physical activity, while others will be examining the environmental and economic impacts.

Obesity, particularly childhood obesity, has become one of the nation’s high priority areas and a national health issue that has reached epidemic proportion. Given the fact that in the last decade alone, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children has increased two and three-fold in most developed countries, and that more than 20% of the nation’s preschool-aged children (aged 2-5) are overweight or obese, this project is of paramount importance. Many experts predict that the current generation of children will be the first in modern history to be threatened with a shorter life span than their parent’s generation. The life-threatening consequences of this epidemic create a compelling and critical call for action that cannot be ignored.

Using qualitative analysis, a team of researchers, including a sociologist, family scientist, and anthropologist conducted focused groups with parents of young children and childcare providers. Researchers visited 3 Head Start Centers in Princess Anne, MD, Salisbury, MD and Crisfield, MD, respectively to talk with teachers and parents about their perspectives on childhood obesity, and to get an understanding about their knowledge about childhood obesity and their behaviors. Sixty minute interviews were conducted with groups of parents and teachers, separately, at each center. Each focus group at each center consisted of approximately 5 -10 parents and teachers, respectively. While the teacher focus groups consisted of all females, the parent groups consisted of both male and females. Demographic data was collected on each group of participants to determine race, ethnicity, age, SES and level of education.

The tapes were transcribed and based on preliminary results, the following themes have emerged: (1) obesity is both a health and socio-economic issue; (2)family dynamics influence/impact eating habits, food choices, and how obesity is defined; (2)impact of finances on food choices & eating habits; (3)limited historical concept of the meaning of obesity; (4)socio-cultural differences in defining obesity; (5)knowledge & information vs. behavior expectations; and (6)societal changes regarding food, food choices, exercise & healthy lifestyles. Researchers will continue to assess these results using quantitative and qualitative analyses, providing a more in-depth analysis of the themes that have emerged in explaining how parents and childcare providers understand childhood obesity and what role each plays in addressing it.

As a family scientist I am well aware of the ramifications and health implications of obesity not only for the individual, but for the family and other social institutions. I recognize the potential of this project to change the teaching strategies used to promote healthy lifestyles among pre-school aged children and their parents, and the teachers in child development/daycare centers. I also recognize that this proposal has the potential to provide to shine the spotlight on childcare centers, childcare providers, and the educational training necessary for quality instruction. Childcare workers are not glorified babysitters. They serve an important role in the care, education and development of pre-school aged children. This research has the potential to deliver a consistent message that cuts across settings and fill the gap in literature and research on childhood obesity, particularly at it relates to preschools in low income rural communities.