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Community gardens involving young children as a potential obesity-prevention strategy: A systematic review to inform future research and practice

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Science at St Kate's Day Abstract submission
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Title: Community gardens involving young children as a potential obesity-prevention strategy: A systematic review to inform future research and practice

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Childhood obesity remains a significant public health concern in the United States. Contributing factors to the development of obesity include poor quality diets and inadequate physical activity. Rates of obesity continue to soar among all age groups but have recently reached an all time high among preschool-aged children. Inadequate consumption of fruits and vegetables (FV) has been identified as a potential risk factor for childhood obesity. Current intake of FV is lower than current recommendations for this age group. Acquisition of food preferences develops during early childhood and is enhanced through repeated exposures to new foods. Previous research has shown that vegetables are a least favored food among children. During this developmental period, a majority of preschool-aged children spend significant amounts of time in non-parental care settings providing a valuable opportunity to positively impact child health. A growing interest in community gardens or "learning laboratories" in school settings has emerged over the past several years. Numerous unanswered questions exist regarding the overall impact and sustainability of community gardens and healthy child development. The purpose of this systematic review is to summarize the scientific literature pertaining to the use of community gardens as a vehicle for increasing FV intake in preschool-aged children enrolled in childcare settings and to identify gaps that would provide opportunities for future research. Electronic literature databases were used to identify papers using the search terms community gardens, obesity prevention, preschool children (aged 2-5 years), and fruit and vegetable intake either singularly or in combination. Studies were limited to those published in peer reviewed journals in the United States within the past five years. Data analysis is ongoing. Future research needs to address the many unanswered questions related to the benefits and effectiveness of community gardens, issues of sustainability, and impacts on policy development and practice.

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