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IHPR's BFF Program Finds 'Hip' Ways to Boost Latina Girls' Physical Activity

For girls growing up on San Antonio's West Side, exercise may not be as simple as a walk in the park. They encounter stray dogs and face traffic without sidewalks. Ball fields are often in use by boys, leaving girls reluctant to seek a turn. And parents, fearing crime or unwanted attention, can be uneasy about letting girls roam unsupervised.

That's why researchers at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio are testing a new program to increase girls' opportunities to become more active.

The program, "Be Fit with Friends (BFF)" gives girls many options – from basic fitness equipment like jump ropes to volunteer opportunities to online social media, fitness video games and text messaging – to help overcome barriers to physical activity.

Thirty Girl Scouts from West Side troops began trying out BFF in February, and researchers hope to include more this fall.



"We want to build a sustainable program that takes advantage of tools and resources that already exist to help girls add physical activity to their lives," said Dr. Deborah Parra-Medina, a researcher at the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at the Health Science Center. "We think this can open up girls' and parents' minds to engaging in physical activity on an ongoing basis."

BFF, which partners with Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas, reaches girls in these ways:

- During troop meetings, Girls Scouts will learn physical activity basics, such as the difference between moderate and vigorous exercise or the importance of warming up.
- Also at meetings, Girl Scouts will try several "mobile PA (physical activity) units." One holds playground toys like jump ropes. Another has yoga equipment. Others have videogames for Nintendo Wii or Kinect for Xbox 360 that simulate sports and dancing.

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IHPR Researcher among CPRIT Prevention Research Grant Recipients

Dr. Deborah Parra-Medina of the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) has received a new grant to launch a peer education and outreach program encouraging use of the HPV vaccine to prevent cervical cancer among Latina mothers and daughters living in Texas-Mexico border communities.

The grant, for \$297,173, is one of two **awards** for UT Health Science Center at San Antonio researchers from the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT) announced recently. The other is \$890,659 for Dr. Stacey Young-McCaughan to expand the known benefits of exercise to more cancer survivors.

"I am proud and excited about these major grant awards from CPRIT, recognizing the superb quality of prevention science here at the CTRC (Cancer Therapy and Research Center) and the UT Health Science Center," said CTRC Director Dr. Ian M. Thompson, Jr. "Our physicians and scientists of the CTRC are convinced that one of our greatest priorities is cancer prevention and using interventions like exercise to reduce the burden of this disease."

The focus of this round of CPRIT funding is to make evidence-based cancer prevention

practices more widely available, said Young-McCaughan, a professor in the School of Medicine's psychiatry department.

Young-McCaughan's research and that of many others shows tangible benefits of regular exercise for cancer survivors, she said, but making it a widespread practice is a big task.

"That's always the hardest part of research," she said. "Once you figure out what the correct answer is, you have to replicate it nine bajillion times."

"What we want to do is take what we know from the research and offer that program to patients diagnosed with cancer in Bexar County — but if people are willing to come from farther out, we want to see them, too."

Participants will get complete physical assessments and have fitness programs designed for them, that they can practice either at the facility or in their homes. They'll also be asked to come in for further assessments, both to make sure they're doing well and give



Deborah Parra-Medina



Stacey Young-McCaughan

feedback to researchers. That feedback means the program will continue to produce more research data on the links between cancer prevention and health.

Parra-Medina's program will train "*promotoras*," or community health workers, who will be assisted by female college students to educate Latina mothers and daughters about cervical cancer risk factors and the HPV vaccine, which prevents cervical cancer.

"We really need to promote the use of the vaccine in populations at risk, and in the Rio Grande Valley we have very high rates of cervical cancer," Parra-Medina said.

IHPR Articles and Presentations

Articles

- ▶ Lopez-Class, M, Castro, FG, and **Ramirez, AG**. (2011). Conceptions of acculturation: a review and statement of critical issues. *Social Science & Medicine*, April 11. [Epub ahead of print].
- ▶ **Parra-Medina, D**, and Hilfinger Messias, DK. (2011). Promotion of Physical Activity Among Mexican-Origin Women in Texas and South Carolina: An Examination of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Environmental Factors. *Quest* 63(1):100-117.
- ▶ Akopian, D, Jayaram, V, Aaleswara, L, Esfahanian, M, **Mojica, C, Parra-Medina, D**, Kaghyan, S. (2011). Mobile Text Messaging Solutions for Obesity Prevention. Proceedings of the

Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers (SPIE) Conference Volume 7881: pp. 788104-15.

Presentations

- ▶ **Amelie Ramirez**, IHPR. "Research Networks & Foundation Initiatives: Bridging Cancer & Culture." AACR 102nd Annual Meeting, April 5, 2011, Orlando, Fla.
- ▶ **Amelie Ramirez**, IHPR. "*Salud America!* A Novel Approach to Reverse Latino Childhood Obesity." Leadership for Healthy Communities Grantee Meeting, Feb. 18, 2011, San Antonio, Texas.
- ▶ **Amelie Ramirez**, IHPR. "*Salud America!* A Novel Campaign to Reverse Latino Childhood Obesity." Healthy Eating Research Conference, Feb. 3, 2011, Austin, Texas.

Brief

IHPR Researcher Recognized for "Tai Chi" Study

IHPR researcher and master's in public health student Dorothy Long Parma's study, "Using Tai Chi Ch'uan to Improve Mobility in Independent-Living Seniors," was one of four selected as "outstanding projects" at the annual Community Service Learning Conference April 7 at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio. Long Parma was selected from among the 43 student grantees funded by the Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics at the Health Science Center. She and her team — Laura Reyes, a first-year master's in public health student, and mentor Dr. Nameer Kirma, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology — tested "Tai Chi," a slow, low-impact traditional Chinese martial art, among seniors at a local apartment complex. They found that over the 8-week study, participants achieved appropriate moderate-intensity physical activity levels for their age group and reported subjective mobility improvement.



A group of seniors at the Chandler Apartments in San Antonio partake in "Tai Chi" martial arts as part of IHPR researcher Dorothy Long Parma's study.

Seminars in Translational Research

Seminars in Translational Research (STRech) **unite investigators** from The UT Health Science Center and UTSA in basic, clinical and social sciences to highlight the stages of the scientific translation of research discoveries.

Continuing Education Audio Conferences

The Teleconference Network of Texas at the UT Health Science Center at San Antonio has developed **audio conferences** on topics like blood banking, microbiology, nutrition updates, health education and training, social work and more. Register by calling 1-800-982-8868.

CancerCare Workshops

CancerCare, in partnership with *Redes En Acción*, which is led by the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio, will offer free workshops on a variety of issues. Register **here**.

Latino Health Equity Conference

Familias En Acción will present *The Latino Health Equity Conference: 2011 and Beyond* May 12, 2011, in Portland, Ore. The **conference** will build the path for a Latino Health Initiative with strategies to eliminate health disparities. Keynote speaker is Dr. Amelie G. Ramirez, director of the Institute for Health Promotion Research.

BFF Program

► *Continued from Page 1*

- To connect girls to community resources, weekend activities are planned, such as volunteering at the San Antonio Food Bank's Spurs Community Garden.
- Each girl will receive two step-counting devices for herself and a parent.
- On their cell phones, girls will receive motivational text messages, vote on favorite activities and more. There's also a Facebook group where girls can post photos, see an events calendar, watch instructional videos on YouTube and interact with each other.



an IHPR project coordinator, said the girls "expressed concerns about stray dogs, traffic and broken, uneven or missing sidewalks."

Added Parra-Medina:

"And strangers — particularly if they were male."

As researchers considered how to use technology in BFF, they surveyed 102 girls. Older girls typically had their own cell phones, while younger girls shared with family members or did not have cell phone access. The most popular social-networking sites were Facebook and YouTube. Girls had videogame consoles at home but rarely used them.

Researchers also talked to parents, who were protective of daughters.

"Some parents say, 'The girls appear more mature than they are. They attract unwanted attention. They don't have the skills to be able to manage different situations,'" Parra-Medina said. "So the parental response is to protect. They don't want the girls out and about unsupervised."

Parents were largely unaware of community



More than two-dozen Girl Scouts in San Antonio are trying out the "Be Fit with Friends (BFF)" program, which aims to give girls many options to help overcome barriers to physical activity.

programs for girls that were accessible and affordable. Meanwhile, agencies from the project's Community Advisory Board said they had programs and could be flexible on cost, but they need participation to continue them.

The barriers identified through the photo project and information gleaned from the girls' survey results helped spotlight opportunities for girls to get physical activity.

"We believe the girls and our community overall helped us design our 'Be Fit with Friends' program in a way that will give local girls a whole new perspective: that they can indeed find fun ways to engage in physical activity and overcome potential barriers," Parra-Medina said.

The Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering at The University of Texas at San Antonio created the infrastructure for the text-messaging portion of BFF

"This multi-year study is an example of how agencies can come together and affect change for the betterment of communities," said Anna Maria Chávez, CEO for Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas.


West Side girls were key to creating BFF

A year ago, a different group of Girl Scouts used cameras to document obstacles to physical activity in their neighborhoods. Laura Esparza,

About the E-newsletter

This E-newsletter is produced quarterly by the Institute for Health Promotion Research. Please send news items or story ideas to IHPR@uthscsa.edu.

Editor: Cliff Despres
Design: Jeffrey Heinke Design


The Institute for Health Promotion Research
The University of Texas Health Science
Center at San Antonio
8207 Callaghan Road, Suite 353
San Antonio, TX 78230
(210) 562-6500 • <http://ihpr.uthscsa.edu>

The Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) is part of the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics in the School of Medicine at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. The IHPR is supported in part by the Health Science Center and its Cancer Therapy & Research Center and Regional Academic Health Center. The IHPR investigates the causes and solutions to the unequal impact of cancer and other chronic diseases among the populations of South Texas, Texas, and the nation.