

An evaluation of a healthy eating and active living program for adolescents in out-of-home residential care

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Children and young people in out-of-home care experience poorer health than their counterparts in the general community, including lower levels of immunization and attainment of educational objectives, and higher levels of mental health issues, behavioural disorders, risky health behaviours, illnesses, accidents, and *obesity*. However, the health risk of overweight and obesity when children are placed in out-of-home care has been largely ignored. Historically, a negative consequence of institutionalization has been malnutrition. More recent findings suggest that individuals who have adverse childhood experiences, particularly abuse and neglect, may instead be at increased risk of obesity. To date, there are a lack of strategies or interventions designed specifically to combat overweight and obesity in children in out-of-home care. Furthermore, a survey (Australian based) on case manager perceptions of healthy eating and exercise, found that few staff members had adequate levels of knowledge or training in healthy eating or physical activity, and few organizations had policies or resources and programs in place to support healthy eating or physical activity among their young people. As a direct response to the growing prevalence of obesity and associated health risks for young people in out-of-home care, we have developed the Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEAL) program; an Australian Council research grant (2012-2014) is funding a randomized trial to measure the effectiveness of the HEAL program across two major community service organizations that provide out-of-home care to disadvantaged adolescents in Victoria, Australia. This presentation will overview the HEAL program and the findings to date.

Biography

Helen Skouteris is an Associate Professor in Developmental Psychology in the School of Psychology, Deakin University. Associate Professor Skouteris has a strong track record in longitudinal research and randomized controlled trials, predominantly in the area of maternal and childhood obesity. She is the Principal Investigator on four successful Category 1 grants since 2010, and has published 77 peer-reviewed papers and 4 invited book chapters in the last 5 years. She is a member of the Editorial Board, *Early Child Development and Care*, and in 2012 edited a special issue on the Parental Influences of Childhood Obesity for that journal.