South Carolina Researchers Discuss Causes and Potential Solutions Related to Summer Weight Gain and Fitness Loss Among Children

Researchers from the Exercise Science Department in the University of South Carolina’s Arnold School of Public Health have published a paper in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine on the causes and potential solutions of summer weight gain and fitness loss. Assistant professor of exercise science Glenn Weaver served as lead author on the article.

In 2017, Dr. Weaver received a $275K R21 grant from the National Institutes of Health’s Eunice Kennedy Shriver Institute of Child Health and Human Development to assess the efficacy of a new and innovative summer program (Healthy Summer Learners) to address two challenges faces by low-income households during the summer months: unhealthy weights gains/fitness losses and academic declines. In connection with this work to combat what is known as the “summer slide,” Dr. Weaver’s current paper focuses on causes and solutions related to summer weight gain and fitness loss.

“Over the past three decades, public health professionals have worked to stem the rising childhood obesity epidemic,” Dr. Weaver says. “Despite the field’s best efforts, no progress has been made in reducing child obesity.”

The authors suggest that one reason for this failure may be that the majority of obesity prevention and treatment efforts are offered during the nine-month school year. However, recent research by the authors and others in the field has found that the greatest declines in healthy body composition and fitness take place during the summer months.

They believe that these changes could be explained by the Structured Days Hypothesis, which suggests that children engage in fewer unhealthy behaviors on structured days than on unstructured days. In addition, the summer may contribute to a widening health gap between low- and middle-to-upper-income families.

“During summer, fewer opportunities exist for children from low-income households to access healthy structured programs that do not require fees for participation,” says Dr. Weaver. “Moving forward, public health professionals should prioritize efforts to mitigate unhealthy changes in body composition and fitness loss during the summer by identifying ways to provide access to structured programming during this timeframe for children from low-income households.”