

Validity of a measure to assess the healthy eating and physical activity policies and practices of Australian childcare services

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Background: Childcare services represent a valuable obesity prevention opportunity, providing access to a large portion of children at a vital point in their development. Few rigorously validated measures exist to measure the implementation of healthy eating and physical activity policies and practices in these settings. The aim of this study was to develop and assess the validity of a survey tool to assess healthy eating and physical activity policies and practices in Australian childcare services.

Methods: The study compared two measures (pen and paper survey and observation) of healthy eating and physical activity policies and practices in a sample of 42 childcare services in the Hunter Region of NSW. Research assistants attended consenting services observed relevant practices for one day. Nominated Supervisors and Room Leaders of the service also completed a pen and paper survey during the observation. A total of 43 items were assessed by comparing responses for pen and paper surveys to observation records.

Results: Across all items percentage agreement ranged from 38% to 100% and Kappa scores ranged from -0.06 (poor agreement) to 1 (perfect agreement). A total of 22 (51%) written survey items showed agreement greater than or equal to 80%, and 35 (81%) with agreement greater than or equal to 60%. Items assessing the frequency which staff joined in active play with children reported the lowest percent agreement, while items assessing availability of beverages such as juice, milk and cordial, as well as the provision of foods such as popcorn pretzels and sweet biscuits, reported the highest percent agreement.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that Nominated Supervisors and Room Leaders were able to accurately report on the implementation of a number of practices using the survey tool. The tool may represent a useful instrument for public health researchers to assess the obesogenic environment of Australian childcare services.