Healthy habits established in childhood have lifelong benefits. 1, 2 In 2021, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, questions about young children’s consumption of fruits, vegetables, and sugary drinks, and the time they spent playing outdoors were added to the NSCH. Together with existing questions about screen time and sleep, this brief presents the prevalence of six healthy weight behaviors among children 3-5 years in the United States (US).

PREVALENCE OF HEALTHY WEIGHT BEHAVIORS

- In 2021, 2 in 3 (65.7%) preschool-age children ate fruit at least once a day while less than half (48.9%) ate vegetables at least once a day. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating a variety of fruits and vegetables every day.
- Only 1 in 3 (32.6%) preschool-age children had no sugary drinks in the past week. Sugary drinks (e.g., soda, sports drinks, and fruit drinks that are not 100% juice) are not necessary in the child diet and are not a recommended component of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Only 39.9% of preschool-age children had limited screen time of 1 hour or less per weekday. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting screen time to 1 hour per day of high-quality programming for children 2-5 years.
- 58.7% of preschool-age children played outdoors 2 or more hours per day. The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children 3-5 years be physically active throughout the day.
- Similarly, 61.4% of preschool-age children slept 10 hours or more per day. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends children 3-5 years sleep 10-13 hours per day (including naps).
VARIATIONS IN HEALTHY WEIGHT BEHAVIORS BY FAMILY INCOME

- As income increased, the percent of preschool-age children engaging in each healthy behavior increased.
- The largest differences by family income (30+ percentage points) were in the percent of children getting adequate sleep and avoiding sugary beverages. For example, less than half (42.7%) of children in families below poverty averaged 10 hours or more of sleep per day versus 3 out of 4 (76.5%) children with a family income of 400% or more of poverty.
- The smallest difference by family income (10 percentage points) was in the percent of children playing outdoors for 2 or more hours per day, ranging from 53.2% of children in families below poverty to 63.7% of children with a family income of 400% or more of poverty.

Among all children 3-5 years in the US, 17.6% (2.0 million) engaged in 0 or 1 healthy behavior, 62.1% (7.0 million) engaged in 2 to 4 healthy behaviors, and 20.3% (2.3 million) engaged in 5 or 6 healthy behaviors.
- As family income increased, the number of healthy weight behaviors that children engaged in increased. For example, only 1 in 11 (9.3%) preschool-age children in poverty engaged in 5 or 6 healthy behaviors while 1 in 3 (30.7%) children in families at 400% or more of poverty engaged in 5 or 6 healthy weight behaviors.

*Ratio of Income to Poverty Thresholds; the U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Threshold for a Family with two children and two adults was $27,479 in 2021.
STATE VARIATION IN HEALTHY WEIGHT BEHAVIORS

• The percent of preschool-age children engaging in 5 or 6 healthy behaviors varied widely by state, ranging from 7.2% in Mississippi to 48.3% in Vermont.

• Seven states had a significantly lower percent of children 3-5 years engaging in 5 or 6 healthy weight behaviors than in the US overall: Mississippi (7.2%), Oklahoma (8.8%), Louisiana (11.3%), Alabama (11.4%), Arizona (11.4%), Texas (12.5%), and Georgia (13.3%).

• Seven states had a significantly higher percent of children 3-5 years engaging in 5 or 6 healthy weight behaviors than in the U.S. overall: Vermont (48.3%), New Hampshire (39.1%), Maine (35.9%), Minnesota (35.2%), Wyoming (32.0%), Oregon (29.7%), and Colorado (28.9%).

Percent of Children 3-5 Years Engaging in 5 or 6 Healthy Weight Behaviors, 2021

DATA NOTE

In 2021, parents completed questionnaires for 12,002 children ages 3-5 years. Estimates presented in this brief are weighted to represent children living in U.S. households and children living in each state. Combining multiple years of data enables more reliable estimates, especially for smaller populations. Survey questions about nutrition and outdoor play were first added to the 2021 NSCH. Therefore, it is not yet possible to combine data from multiple years, conduct comparisons to prior years, or examine trends over time for those questions. For details about NSCH questions for young children (0-5 years), middle-age children (6-11 years), and adolescents (12-17 years), visit MCHB’s NSCH webpage.

1Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Healthy Weight Nutrition, and Physical Activity
2Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Preventing Childhood Obesity: 4 Things Families Can Do

For more information about HRSA’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau, visit mchb.hrsa.gov.