

# **Project REAL: A Model for Assessing Nutrition and Physical Activity in Asian American and Pacific Islander Youth**

## ***Background***

Rates of childhood obesity and chronic disease have skyrocketed in recent years. Today, one-third of adolescents are considered overweight or obese. Disease rates and conditions previously only seen in adults – Type 2 diabetes, elevated cholesterol, and high blood pressure – are rising to seriously high levels in adolescents. While several factors play a role, unhealthy behaviors such as excess consumption of junk food and soda and increased television viewing and video game playing contribute to the growing adolescent obesity epidemic.

People of color and those with lower incomes tend to suffer greater rates of obesity and chronic disease and die from them at an earlier age. Culture and socioeconomic status combine to complicate the lifestyle choices that all youth must make. While all youth must learn to minimize eating unhealthy fast food, low-income, ethnic youth must do so in neighborhoods where fast food restaurants are omnipresent and offer a cheap, safe place to eat. Most low-income youth also live in environments where it is not safe to be physically active and where the healthiest foods are neither affordable nor readily available.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are approximately 3.8 million Asian American and Pacific Islanders (APIs) in California, composing 11.2% of the state's population. Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese are the largest groups, and four Bay Area counties (San Francisco, Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Alameda) have the highest populations of APIs. Although chronic disease rates are not as high among many API populations as they are among other ethnic communities, Pacific Islander groups do face a disproportionate burden of overweight and disease. In addition, APIs engage in physical activity less often when compared to the general population. Unfortunately, few quality nutrition and physical activity promotion resources for parents and service providers currently exist that speak to their cultural and linguistic needs.

The mission of the California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness (CANFit) Program is to engage communities and build their capacity to improve the nutrition and physical activity of California's low-income African American, Latino, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and American Indian youth 10-14 years old. CANFit believes that communities themselves are best equipped to address their own health needs and has conducted campaigns for Latino communities and African American youth to raise their awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Through surveys, focus groups, and projects with Filipino, Korean, Southeast Asian, Chinese, and Pacific Islander youth across California, CANFit has learned that academic success is often valued at the expense of excelling at sports or other activities. As a result, many API youth lack the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to participate in physical activities that would benefit their health and well-being.

Drawing from these experiences, CANFit created Project REAL (Redefining Excellence, Activity, and Leadership), a campaign for API youth, between February and May 2003.

Project REAL sought to develop culturally appropriate strategies for increasing physical activity among Asian American and Pacific Islander youth in after-school and community-based programs. CANFit identified the specific issues, needs, and assets of low-income API communities for promoting healthy eating and physical activity. The purpose of this document is to outline the process that CANFit used during the planning and implementation of Project REAL and define a model that other programs can use when addressing nutrition and physical activity in API youth populations.

### ***Community Assessment***

Based on years of working with low-income communities, CANFit has refined a process for engaging youth and communities in devising solutions to local problems through needs assessment. A needs assessment is a method of obtaining information about cultural and ethnic beliefs and behaviors related to food, health, and physical activity. Some of the factors included in this complex relationship include food choices and portions, general health history, socioeconomic status, family attitudes, peer influence, access to food, and availability of places for recreation. When developing interventions to change behavior or educate, it is necessary to address the unique issues of the target group. An assessment is a critical step in understanding those relevant issues.

One way to assess nutrition and physical activity issues is to ask the people in the community. *Key informant interviews, focus groups, and surveys* are techniques that researchers use to collect data from people. The types of information collected from interviews, surveys, and focus groups include:

- Knowledge of nutrition and physical activity
- Attitudes about food and physical activity
- Food preferences and eating patterns
- Physical activity habits
- Access to affordable food and safe places for physical activity
- Body image and self-esteem
- Peer and family influence
- Health awareness
- Acculturation and literacy

Through compiling a *community map or inventory* of a neighborhood, one can identify the physical and social institutions that either encourage or discourage healthy eating and physical activity. With this technique, it is important to document not only the presence of certain resources, but also their location, frequency, and what they offer. For example, if there is a neighborhood park, the inventory should explain when it is open, how clean it is, and who else uses it. A community map may also illustrate the location and characteristics of:

- Grocery stores
- Restaurants
- Liquor stores or convenience stores
- Vending machines
- Health care facilities
- Parks
- Walking/biking trails

- Places for recreation
- Schools
- Churches
- Law enforcement
- Crime
- Local role models
- Employment opportunities

***Project REAL Assessment***

Prior to the start of the campaign, CANFit reviewed the literature related to nutrition and physical activity promotion among API 10-14 year-olds and found that no replicable program models existed. Thus, it became necessary to conduct an assessment of the nutrition and physical activity needs of API adolescents and establish a base of information for others to draw from. To do this, CANFit employed several of the assessment techniques described previously throughout both the planning and implementation stages of Project REAL.

First, CANFit staff met with representatives of organizations experienced in serving API youth populations. The goal was to determine the types of health education and prevention programs that have been successful with API youth, activities that would attract participation from API youth and community-based programs, and San Francisco Bay Area organizations that would be good to contact for involvement in the campaign. CANFit also conducted a focus group at a community-based youth program to learn firsthand from API youth about their eating and activity habits, influences, and interests. The results of these assessments are summarized in the tables below.

<b>INFORMATION FROM API COMMUNITY LEADERS</b>	
Involving API Youth Organizations	lack of awareness of nutrition and physical activity in API community so programs don't provide services; need to meet with staff and find out how to integrate nutrition and physical activity into their other work (advocacy, teen pregnancy, leadership development)
Places to Recruit API Youth	API youth organizations, cultural centers and schools, recreation; receive information via traditional media, Internet, newsletters, video
Engaging API Parents	interested in academics – can sell team sports to parents as strategy for increasing college acceptance; believe nutrition and physical activity are unimportant because kids are not overweight; want their kids to be healthy and successful – focus on long life and prevention of diabetes and stroke; access parents through cultural centers, community-based organizations, middle schools, and churches
Campaign Strategies and Activities	address body image and how to be healthy; focus on physical activity rather than foods from diverse cultures; cultural dances, music, and martial arts; sports clinics; develop culturally- and linguistically-appropriate educational messages (written and verbal); start with overarching theme, then let different groups interpret

INFORMATION FROM API YOUTH	
Favorite Foods	pizza candy, ice cream, nachos, salad, cappuccino, fast food/McDonald's, anything with caffeine, meat
Favorite Healthy Foods	apples, potatoes, oranges, peaches
Why They Like Favorite Foods	taste good, smell good, crunchy
Foods Eaten at Home	meat, pizza pockets, fish, rice, Chinese food
Foods Eaten at School	fries, burrito, not cafeteria food
Foods Eaten with Friends	junk food, candy, Chinese food, fast food
Spare Time Activities	computer, phone, sleep, video games, TV ( <i>Jerry Springer, Simpsons, Friends, South Park</i> ), hip hop (Nelly, Eminem)
Why They Like Sports	get to hang out with friends, take out aggression
Why They Dislike Sports	falling down, having to run too much, not being able to stop (addictive)
Feelings about Exercise	like going to the gym, weight lifting, kickboxing, fun
Activities They Would Like to Learn	salsa dancing, break dancing, rave, soccer, skateboarding, snowboarding
Parental Attitudes	don't like them going out because they're afraid kids will be kidnapped; sometimes disapprove of girls playing sports
Campaign Activities	don't want to dress up in cultural garb, not interested in cultural dance; like idea of filling out survey to choose activities; can't imagine event without junk food

Based on the formative research from these assessments, CANFit concluded that the following components would be essential to a successful nutrition and physical activity promotion campaign for API adolescents:

- Emphasis on physical activity, rather than nutrition;
- Collaboration with community-based organizations serving API youth;
- Parent education; and
- Youth engagement through a fun, mainstream activity.

To identify community-based organizations for potential collaboration, CANFit put out a request for proposals for funding to support projects encouraging physical activity among API adolescents. Organizations receiving mini-grants had access to CANFit's nutrition and physical activity resources, but were free to design whatever program they felt would be most effective in changing behaviors of their youth or educating the larger API community. Selected youth from these organizations were also trained in digital storytelling, a grassroots media tool that empowers youth and communities to create short movies based on photographs, art, and other materials found in their lives using technology. Digital storytelling was incorporated into Project REAL as a way of garnering youth interest in the campaign. Also, educational messages for parents were developed to increase awareness of their children's eating and activity habits.

In addition to improving the eating and activity behaviors of API youth, a goal of Project REAL was to collect information that would be useful for future nutrition and physical activity education efforts in this population. Thus, assessment was intertwined with each aspect of the campaign. CANFit completed assessments for each of the grantee organizations. Through

neighborhood mapping, interviews with grantee staff, and site assessments, CANFit was able to get a sense of how the youths' environments influence their eating and activity practices. Although the content of their digital stories was largely up to them, youth produced stories with a nutrition or physical activity theme. These stories provide valuable insight into how young people view the issues of nutrition and physical activity. Lastly, the parent education component consisted of focus groups in which parents shared their perspectives on health, culture, and their children. Data from these sessions informed the development of educational materials that will be disseminated through API organizations and at health events in API communities.

The next section of this guide shares findings from the parent focus groups. The results of the grantee assessments, along with a description of each of their projects, are contained in the three case studies throughout this document.

### ***Findings from Parent Focus Groups***

The purpose of the parent focus groups was to learn about nutrition and physical activity in different API communities and use this information to develop educational materials for parents. Between March and September 2003, focus groups were conducted with Chinese (Oakland), Filipino (San Diego), Cambodian (Long Beach), Laotian (Oakland), and Samoan (San Diego) parents. A focus group of Tongan parents in Oakland provided feedback on messages that would appeal specifically to the Tongan community.

Several common themes emerged:

- Youth fast food consumption is high – most eat about 5 times per week
- Most parents do not report participating in regular exercise
- Parents are often too tired or busy to participate in physical activity; staying healthy, maintaining an attractive appearance, and spending time with spouses and children are reasons why they do exercise
- Parents are interested in activities such as walking, jogging, gardening, and dancing
- Most youth participate in regular physical activity, including sports and dance
- Reasons youth are not active: lack of time, lack of interest, and lack of affordable physical activity resources within the community
- Parents believe physical activity is important for youth to stay healthy and develop normally, succeed in school, keep out of trouble, and build self-esteem; girls are encouraged to participate as much as boys
- Many parents encourage their youth to be active by telling them of the benefits of physical activity (health, appearance) and offering tangible rewards (snacks, toys)
- While parents believe that eating and activity have an influence on health, all agree that their youth have no such awareness; not everyone discusses the issue with their youth
- Chinese, Cambodian, and Laotian parents tend to eat more traditional foods eat home, speak mostly in their native languages, and prefer media in their native languages

	<b>CHINESE</b>	<b>FILIPINO</b>	<b>CAMBODIAN</b>	<b>LAOTIAN</b>	<b>SAMOAN</b>	<b>TONGAN</b>
<b>Food eaten at home (traditional vs. American)</b>	Mostly traditional	Half traditional, half American	Mostly traditional	Half traditional, half American	Mostly American	
<b>Frequency of fast food consumption</b>	Parents 1-2x/wk  Youth 5x/wk	Parents 2-3x/wk  Youth 5x/wk	Parents 1-2x/month  Youth daily	Parents 2-3x/wk	Parents 5x/wk  Youth 4x/wk	
<b>Parents' leisure time activities</b>	TV, read, computer or Internet, shop	TV, radio, movies, read, socialize, bike, walk, play with kids	TV, radio, movies, socialize, cook with kids, bike, walk	Read, shop, clean, walk, play with kids, fish	TV, movies, computer, read, bingo, concerts	
<b>Parents' physical activity</b>	Occasional exercise  Jogging, dancing, jumping rope, basketball, stretching, ice skating	Most don't do regularly  Walking, jogging, sit-ups  Average 2x/wk for 15-30 min	Some do regularly  Walking, jogging, gardening  Average 2-4x/week for 30-60 min	Most do regularly	Half do regularly  Walking, weightlifting, running, Polynesian dance	
<b>Parents' reasons for exercising</b>	Stay healthy	Stay healthy, in shape; lower weight, blood pressure, or cholesterol; fit clothes, look good, be sexy, and attract husband; have energy;	Stay healthy, in shape; fight diabetes	Stay healthy; part of routine; no car	Keep up with kids; work; stay healthy; look good	

		spend time with husband and family				
<b>Parents' reasons for not exercising</b>	Too tired; busy		Too tired; too much work; physically limited	Too busy; already "skinny"		
	<b>CHINESE</b>	<b>FILIPINO</b>	<b>CAMBODIAN</b>	<b>LAOTIAN</b>	<b>SAMOAN</b>	<b>TONGAN</b>
<b>Youths' leisure time activities</b>	TV, computer, bike, sports	TV, movies, video games, read, play music, board games, shop, sports	Movies, video games, sports	Movies, play with friends	Movies, computer, video games, church, play music, sports, bike, swim, Polynesian dance	
<b>Youths' physical activity</b>	Some do regularly  Running, biking, dancing, ball games, kung fu, PE at school  Average 1x/wk for 90 min	Most do regularly  Baseball, football, basketball, volleyball, boxing, running, swimming, walking dog, bowling, weightlifting	Most do regularly  Basketball, volleyball, boxing, running, swimming  Average 4-6x/wk for 30-120 min	All do regularly  Basketball, soccer	All do regularly  Leg lifts, squats, crunches, pushups	All do regularly  Soccer, rugby, volleyball, basketball, dance, boxing
<b>Reasons youth are not active</b>	Lazy; tired; too much school work	Lazy; not enough time; prefer inactive hobbies		Jobs; not enough time	Lazy; prefer inactive hobbies; physically small; peer pressure or rebelling	Not enough physical activity resources; not safe
<b>Parents' participation in</b>	All participate with youth	All participate with youth	Some participate with youth		Half participate with youth	

<b>youth physical activity</b>	Ice skating, jogging, ball games	Walking, running, swimming, tennis, biking, volleyball, boxing, baseball, bowling, fishing, camping, gardening, cleaning house	Running, swimming, tennis, biking		4-Square, tetherball, basketball, wrestle, baseball	
<b>Parents' encouragement of youth physical activity</b>	Most encourage – don't want youth to be lazy	All encourage – want youth to be healthy, live a long life, have fun	All encourage – want youth to be healthy, live a long life, have fun	Some encourage	All encourage	
	<b>CHINESE</b>	<b>FILIPINO</b>	<b>CAMBODIAN</b>	<b>LAOTIAN</b>	<b>SAMOAN</b>	<b>TONGAN</b>
<b>How parents encourage youth physical activity</b>	Tell them they will grow faster, enjoy good health, not get fat, and look beautiful; reward with toys	Tell them it's good for their health; limit TV; reward with snacks	Tell them it's good for their health and will make them look handsome		Let them choose activities; find places for interests; be supportive	
<b>Reasons parents don't encourage physical activity</b>	None	Youth have asthma or are sick; not safe; too hot; makes them hyper or too rowdy	None	Can't afford activities; daughter never home; youth are thin	Youth are too busy; youth hang out with wrong crowd; costly	
<b>Parents' beliefs about youth physical activity</b>	Important for their health; growth and development; weight reduction; intelligence	Important for staying healthy; stimulate mind; sleep better; keep busy and out of trouble	Important for staying healthy; be smarter in school	Important	Important for staying healthy; socializing normally; appreciating their bodies and building self-esteem; build	

	Girls should do as much as boys	Girls should do as much as boys	Girls should do as much as boys		fitness, endurance, coordination; keep them off street  Girls should do as much as boys	
<b>Parents' health awareness</b>	All think eating and activity influences health  Related health problems – gastro-intestinal, heart disease, high cholesterol, kidney disease, diabetes  All know family members with these	All think eating and activity influences health  Related health problems – heart disease, stroke, hypertension, cancer, knee problems, arthritis, diabetes, asthma  All know family members with these	All think eating and activity influences health  Related health problems – heart disease, stroke, hypertension, cancer, hepatitis C  All know family members with these	All think eating and activity influences health  Related health problems –diabetes  All know family members with these	Most think eating and activity influences health  Related health problems – high blood pressure, diabetes, gout, cholesterol, asthma, cancer, obesity, arthritis  All know family members with these	All think diabetes, gout, and high blood pressure are serious and know family member with them; diabetes thought of as an older person's disease or just something that runs in families; overweight or obesity not seen as a problem
	<b>CHINESE</b>	<b>FILIPINO</b>	<b>CAMBODIAN</b>	<b>LAOTIAN</b>	<b>SAMOAN</b>	<b>TONGAN</b>
<b>Parents' beliefs about youths' health awareness</b>	Most say their youth <u>don't</u> think their eating and activity will influence them as adults  All discuss with youth	Most say their youth <u>don't</u> think their eating and activity will influence them as adults  Most discuss with youth	Some say their youth <u>don't</u> think their eating and activity will influence them as adults  Some discuss with youth		Most say their youth <u>don't</u> think their eating and activity will influence them as adults  Most <u>don't</u> discuss with youth	All say their youth <u>don't</u> think their eating and activity will influence them as adults
<b>Parents' language</b>	Speak Cantonese and Mandarin at	Speak English at home, some	2/3 speak Cambodian at	Speak Cambodian and Mien at home	Speak English at home, some	

	home  Most prefer Chinese media	Tagalog  Most prefer English media	home, rest speak English  Most prefer Cambodian media		Samoan  Prefer English media	
<b>Parents' desired campaign messages</b>	<p>Exercise will keep children healthy, increase your child's intelligence, prevent isolation, help with growth and development; exercise is a milestone for success</p> <p>Want to see both positive (70%) and negative (30%) images – smiling child doing physical activity, receiving award from Mayor, Asian sports stars</p>				<p>Health is future; keep up with culture, tradition, heritage</p>	<p>Live long and prosper; be happy; healthy doesn't mean skinny; strong bodies, strong minds, strong families; teach your kids your roots; balance</p> <p>Want to see children with parents being active, "real" (not too skinny) Pacific Islanders</p>

***Case Study 1: Redefining Excellence – OASES Health and Physical Fitness Project***

Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES) provides tutoring and enrichment activities to API youth in Chinatown. Grocery stores, farmers' markets, and produce stands are plentiful, though youth primarily purchase their snacks from liquor stores and fast food restaurants. Despite a strong crime presence, recreation is accessible through the YMCA, local community college, and city Department of Parks and Recreation.

During the Health and Physical Fitness project, OASES offered a health workshop once a week and sports workshops five days a week to a total of 117 youth. In the health workshop, nutrition lessons concerning the Food Guide Pyramid and portion sizes culminated in a field trip to the Hall of Health, an interactive museum. Students in the sports workshops participated in warm-ups, stretches, strength-building exercises, and games. At the end of the semester, those students showcased their new athletic skills and improved hand-eye coordination at the OASES Olympics, an event that also engaged college volunteers.

As a result of the campaign, OASES was able to enhance their after-school programming in the areas of nutrition and physical activity. The topic of nutrition took on a more significant portion of the content covered in the health workshop, while participation in the sports workshop reached 100% almost daily. These improvements will be sustained through lessons plans developed by the instructors for future use and the acquisition of fitness equipment.

Digital Stories #2 tells the tale of an evil doctor tries to take over the world by poisoning people with chips. In Digital Story #5, an ice creature that overindulges in fattening foods learns about healthy eating and physical activity.

***Case Study 2: Redefining Activity – Roosevelt Middle School Wrestling Team***

With a 51% API student population, Roosevelt Middle School in Oakland is home to one of the only middle school-based health centers in California. In addition to the prevention and wellness programs provided by the health center, the school also offers activities such as basketball, capoeira, and hip hop dance and spoken word. Most students eat in the cafeteria, though the most popular lunch items are chips, fried rice, and chow mein. After school, the students purchase snacks from liquor stores and an adjacent house that sells mostly chips, candy, and soda.

The Roosevelt Health Center established an after-school wrestling team to encourage API youth to become more physically active. Because wrestling involves competition between participants of equal size and weight, it is ideal for API youth who may lack the height or size, skills, or strength necessary to excel in other athletics. Coached by a seventh grade science teacher who happened to also be a competitive wrestler, 24 youth (20 boys and 4 girls) participated in the wrestling team. Practices were held twice a week in the school gym and involved running and wrestling drills. High school wrestlers volunteered their time to assist in coaching and mentoring. The team attended three tournaments and collected a total of six medals. Healthy breakfasts, lunches, and snacks were provided on tournament days to demonstrate how to properly fuel the body for athletics.

By the end of the season, all wrestlers had achieved strength gains and cardiovascular improvement, averaging 30-45 second decreases in mile times. They also reported being able to complete the practices without getting tired. Team spirit and an encouraging atmosphere were also results, and the project received additional funding from CANFit to continue over the summer and during the next school year.

In Digital Story #3, a young wrestler explains why he likes the sport.

***Case Study 3: Redefining Leadership – Hei Gu Youth Ensemble***

A project of Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership, the Hei Gu Youth Ensemble meets once a week in an Oakland community center. Basketball courts and a playground are nearby. Besides one major grocery store and a collection of restaurants, this residential neighborhood is home to few other businesses and shopping establishments. A community mapping revealed that drugs, gangs, and violence appear to be lacking, and most youth use the bus as the major method of transportation. Liquor stores provide the majority of the snacks these youth consume.

The Hei Gu Youth Ensemble consists of 18 young women of Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, Chinese, and Filipino descent who practice the art of Chinese drumming. Each of their practices begins with stretching and martial arts exercises, necessary preparation for the vigorous – and traditionally male – activity of drumming.

During Project REAL, the young women were encouraged to engage in physical activity outside of the class, as well as to eat healthy foods. Soda and snacks, except for water, were not allowed during practices. They performed at a youth arts festival and in the Chinese New Year parade.

The young women were empowered not only by improvements in their individual strength, flexibility, and endurance, but also by the appreciation they received from their audiences.

In Digital Story #1, young women discuss the traditionally male activity of drumming.

### ***Conclusion & Recommendations***

Physical activity and nutrition are becoming increasingly relevant in API communities. Many API youth grow up in environments where their traditional foods are replaced by foods high in fat and sugar and where sedentary activities – using the computer, watching TV, and playing video games – are the norm. Parents and community institutions such as after-school programs have a role to play in modeling healthy eating and activity behaviors and providing health-promoting environments for API youth. Project REAL demonstrated that after-school programs could successfully incorporate physical activity by tailoring the activities to the specific interests of the target youth. Digital storytelling is an effective strategy not only for engaging youth, but also for giving them a vehicle to share their thoughts and experiences, as well as express their creativity and individuality. The project also revealed that API parents need more education about nutrition and physical activity. For example, they want to learn ways to encourage their children to eat healthier and be more active and to motivate themselves to engage in more activity.

Future efforts must address the cultural and linguistic differences among API sub-groups. Though APIs share many common values, there are subtle variations between Asians and Pacific Islanders and between recent immigrants and APIs who have lived in the U.S. for multiple generations. It is necessary to develop materials and interventions that convey the broad theme of good nutrition and physical activity, yet address the unique aspects of each distinct sub-group. Project REAL attempted to do this by developing a series of educational materials featuring a variety of people and languages, but was limited by funding. Similar community-level interventions focused on healthy eating and physical activity are needed to build greater awareness of this issue among API families and institutions and foster the healthy development of API youth.

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