School’s Active Living by Design program awarded grant to support healthy communities initiative

Active Living by Design was tapped in February 2008 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to lead Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities, a new five-year, $44-million program, to help underserved and vulnerable communities at greatest risk for childhood obesity plan for and implement changes in policies, systems and environments that increase opportunities for active living and healthy eating.

By the end of the grant period, Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities will work with up to 100 local communities across the country, says Sarah Strunk, director of Active Living by Design, a national initiative to create community environments that support healthy children, youth and families.

The program will focus on supporting multidisciplinary partnerships in their efforts to improve their communities, such as constructing or enhancing parks, trailways and greenways, changing or implementing policies to create more opportunities for active transportation and healthier food options, and creating social norms to ensure that healthier choices become the easier choices.

“Our short-term goal is to seed projects around the country that demonstrate which policy and environmental changes help communities become healthier. Our long-term goal is to reduce the incidence of childhood obesity in communities that are hardest hit,” Strunk says.

Active Living by Design, part of the School’s North Carolina Institute for Public Health, was launched by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and now is funded by a variety of organizations. The program has been successful in helping local communities across the nation increase active living and healthy eating by focusing on systems, policies and environmental change strategies.

For more information on Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities, visit www.healthykidshealthycommunities.org.

— BY MARGARITA DE PANO

Mental disorders in parents linked to autism in children

Parents of children with autism were roughly twice as likely to have been hospitalized for a mental disorder, such as schizophrenia, than parents of other children, according to an analysis of Swedish birth and hospital records by a UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health researcher and colleagues in the U.S. and Europe.


“We are trying to determine whether autism is more common among families with other psychiatric disorders,” says study author Dr. Julie Daniels, UNC assistant professor of epidemiology and maternal and child health. “Establishing an association between autism and other psychiatric disorders might enable future investigators to better focus on genetic and environmental factors that might be shared among these disorders.”

“Our research shows that mothers and fathers diagnosed with schizophrenia were about twice as likely to have a child diagnosed with autism,” Daniels adds. “We also saw higher rates of depression and personality disorders among mothers, but not fathers.”

This information will help researchers look among related diseases, such as psychiatric disorders, for causes of autism, Daniels says. “It may eventually help identify opportunities to prevent or treat the disorder.”

The study examined 1,237 children born between 1977 and 2003 who were diagnosed with autism before age 10, and compared them with 30,925 control subjects matched for gender, year of birth and hospital. The large sample size enabled researchers to distinguish between psychiatric histories of mothers versus fathers in relation to autism. The association was present regardless of the timing of the parent’s diagnosis relative to the child’s diagnosis.

For more information, visit www.sph.unc.edu/news/autism.html.