



February 8, 2012

Ms. Shannon Russell

Dear Ms. Russell:

Thank you for writing to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) concerning the Strong4Life campaign that targets overweight children in an effort to curb childhood obesity. Since the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) is one of the NIH Institutes that supports research on obesity and its consequences, I was asked to respond.

I agree with you that this campaign carries a great risk of increasing stigma for those children who are overweight or obese which, in turn, can reinforce unhealthy behaviors (e.g., overeating). A number of research studies over the last decade have supported this concern. For example, studies suggest that overweight children who are teased about their appearance are more likely to binge eat or use unhealthy weight-control practices, and weight-based victimization has been correlated with lower levels of physical activity. Not surprisingly, stigmatization of obese individuals, particularly adolescents, poses risks to their psychological health.

Other studies show that the perception that obesity is solely a matter of personal responsibility, as opposed to understanding the complexity of contributing factors, can increase negative stereotypes of overweight people. It is important, therefore, that public messages about obesity address this complexity whenever possible.

Here at the NIH, serious efforts are being made to understand the causes, and address the consequences, of obesity. In Fiscal Year 2010, the last year for which complete data are available, the NIH supported more than \$800 million on obesity-related research. A trans-NIH working group comprising representatives from all of the interested Institutes and Centers, is actively pursuing joint research efforts. A good overall description of these efforts, including the new NIH Obesity Strategic Plan, can be found at:
<http://obesityresearch.nih.gov/about/about.aspx>.

Since the NIH is a component of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), we coordinate our efforts with our sister agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which sponsors a range of programs aimed at combating obesity and increasing health (<http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood>). The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Regina Benjamin, published her "Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation" in 2010 (available at <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov>), and in late January, HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius talked about eating healthy foods as one way to prevent heart disease.

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(<http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2012pres/02/201202b.html>). Addressing obesity in the U.S. is a clear priority for our Department.

Again, thank you for writing to the NIH about your concerns. We strongly support programs and public health messages that are based on carefully conducted research, and I hope this information is helpful to you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan E. Guttmacher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "A".

Alan E. Guttmacher, M.D.
Director