Kids – ‘Go for your life’ is a program that focuses on improving children’s healthy eating and physical activity behaviours with an aim of reducing the risk of childhood overweight and obesity.

One element of Kids – ‘Go for your life’ is the work to develop healthy children’s settings through primary schools and early childhood services via an award program. The award program provides a comprehensive, yet simple, guide for schools and services to create healthy environments for children to enjoy being active and eating well every day.

Schools and early childhood services join the program as members and receive a range of free resources, training and support as they work through a number of criteria to improve their policies and practices and become awarded. Once awarded, schools and services receive a sign for their front gate to show to their community their commitment to children’s healthy eating and physical activity.

In 2009, 54 primary schools from rural, regional and metro areas in Victoria participated in an evaluation of the Kids – ‘Go for your life’ award program. The evaluation examined the differences in nutrition and physical activity environments of schools that, at the time of data collection, were members, had been awarded nine months or less (awarded) or had been awarded more than nine months (long term awarded).

General information about schools involved in the evaluation

• 38% of schools were members of the program.
• 31% of schools had been awarded.
• 31% of schools had been long term awarded.
• 71 school staff members were interviewed including teachers, principals, assistant principals, canteen managers and support staff.
Parents’ opinions

“The canteen offers great healthy food options at fair prices.”
– Parent, member school

“It’s difficult as a parent to be sending healthy foods when other children are purchasing ‘junk food’ from the canteen.”
– Parent, awarded school

“The school could go further by providing lunch orders that are genuinely healthy.”
– Parent, long term awarded school

Support for healthy eating

• Priority for nutrition was rated highly in more awarded and long term awarded schools (Figure 3).

• Teachers acting as role models was rated highly across all schools (Figure 3).

• Parental support for healthy eating was rated highly in more long term awarded schools (Figure 3).

Figure 1. School nutrition policies and effectiveness

Figure 2. Staff opinions on factors related to school’s food service

Figure 3. School support and priority for healthy eating

“The children are usually healthy but many parents are far from it. Programs are needed to get the parents to participate.”
– Parent, long term awarded school

“It’s much easier for me to explain to my child about healthy eating when I have someone else teaching him the same principles.”
– Parent, awarded school

Healthy eating at school

Policy

Figure 1 shows that staff in the majority of awarded schools reported that their schools had a written nutrition policy. The proportion of schools where staff rated the policies as very effective was similar between member and awarded schools, but increased greatly in long term awarded schools.

Food service

More than 80% of schools reported having some sort of food service (canteen, local shop, etc.). Staff opinions on the nutritional value of the food provided in the food service and the foods available was associated with the award status of the school (Figure 2). More awarded schools had food services that encouraged the sale of healthy foods at a reduced cost (Figure 2).
Physical activity at school

Policy

Figure 4 shows that more awarded and long term awarded schools reported having a physical activity policy. It also shows the proportion of schools where staff rated the policies as very effective. This was similar amongst member and awarded schools, but increased in long term awarded schools.

Support for physical activity

- Physical activity was rated as a high priority in most schools (Figure 6).
- Links with community organisations were rated highly in a larger proportion of long term awarded schools (Figure 6).
- Teachers acting as a role model was rated similarly across most schools (Figure 6).

Figure 6. School support for physical activity

Below is a selection of comments reflecting parents’ knowledge and opinions about physical activity at their child’s school.

“We have regular days where the bus stops several kilometres from school and the kids walk the rest of the way.”
– Parent, long term awarded school

“Technology is taking over and is harder to promote other forms of activities without support from schools.”
– Parent, awarded school

Formal physical education

The number of minutes children spent in formal physical education (PE) increased from Prep through to Grade six (Figure 5). Children in long term awarded schools spent more time in formal PE compared to member and awarded schools.

Figure 5. Minutes spent in physical education
Parental opinions

Over 95% of parents from all schools responded that they would support a school-based program to encourage healthy eating and physical activity.

The percentage of parents who believed their child’s school promotes and supports healthy eating were as follows: member - 94%; awarded - 97%; long term awarded - 98%.

“I feel that staff do their utmost best to provide my children with every opportunity possible to participate in physical activity….the staff should be proud of the job they do.”
– Parent, long term awarded school

“I am a volunteer in my child’s school canteen and I have got to know what is an amber food or green food and have learnt a lot about what is nutritional for children...”
– Parent, awarded school

Children’s behaviours

• The average number of serves of different foods and beverages that parents reported their child had consumed yesterday (the previous school day) was similar across children from all schools.

• The average number of hours that parents reported their children spent watching TV was greater than the hours they spent playing outside, across all schools.

Key messages

• There is opportunity for parents and schools to work together to create a consistent, supportive, health-promoting environment for children.

• Kids – ‘Go for your life’ schools that have healthy eating and physical activity policies appear to become more effective the longer that they have been implemented.

• Children’s behaviours are hard to change and the Kids – ‘Go for your life’ program may need to be implemented for a longer period of time before changes are seen.

• Awarded and long-term awarded schools on average conduct more healthy eating and physical activity promotion activities compared to member schools.