

Pediatric Weight Management in the Garden

A Role for Horticultural Therapists on the Healthcare Team



Children receiving instructions about planting in a raised bed.

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The rapid rise in obesity among children and adolescents, from a 5% prevalence in 1978 to 19.3% in 2018, is one of the most serious public health challenges facing the United States.¹ Nearly every system in a child's developing body is affected by obesity, which puts them at increased risk of disease and disability throughout their life.² Today, gardening as a health intervention, which held great promise as a therapeutic modality at the founding of our nation,³ is poised to be added to our collective toolkit for preventing and managing obesity.

One pediatric obesity treatment program, [Duke Healthy Lifestyles](#) in Durham, NC, has used gardening activities through their community partner, Bull City Fit, to promote

physical activity habits and improve participants' nutrition. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything.

"[The program] would have gardening days where kids would go out to our community garden and be guided in thinking about what they are eating," says Jared Mathewson, Program Coordinator at Bull City Fit. This program is free for a year to clinic patients with a body mass index above the 95th percentile for their age and gender. The pandemic changed programming from six days a week of in-person activity at multiple sites to mostly virtual. Their community garden at the Edison Johnson Recreation Center went untended.

When Jared joined the team midway through 2023, Bull City

OBESITY AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN THE U.S.¹





Child carefully handling a plant.

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Fit was just beginning to return to capacity. Jared, who has a Master of Public Health from the University of North Carolina and previously worked at a local food access organization, helps manage the programming and deliver fresh fruits and vegetables (from food banks) in the clinic. He is part of a much larger clinical team that includes physicians, dietitians, physical therapists, and behavioral specialists. Their approach to pediatric obesity, which connects healthcare with community Parks and Recreation services, was published in 2023.⁴

Currently, Bull City Fit has no horticultural therapist on the team. However, Jared is excited about the work ahead: "Reclaiming the garden would be fantastic for the kids here. All the beds are there, but it's weedy and full of vines." He plans on reincorporating the garden into programming over the coming months. "They can do it as long as someone is there to help," added Jared.

Clinical programs like Bull City Fit, which aim to support healthy and engaged youth into adulthood, may be more effective with horticultural therapists on staff to maximize nature-related programming. Similar Family Healthy Weight Programs exist in communities all over our country.⁵ The season is ripe to integrate horticultural therapists into these healthcare settings.

As we barrel toward the summer of 2024, know that groups of children in leafy Durham will be deep in the garden beds, clearing away old vines and planting seeds from older generations. Let's follow their lead.



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