



Childhood Obesity: A National Epidemic

It could be a weed in your lawn, a little white lie, or a viral outbreak.

Or, it could be a child starting life with a weight problem. If you don't stop it early, it is a problem that can grow out of control. In fact, it already has.

Childhood obesity is approaching epidemic proportions. Obesity in children age six to eleven has doubled in the last twenty years and is now at an all-time high. Obesity in adolescents ages twelve to nineteen has tripled. In fact, one out of five children in the US is obese.

And that is just for obesity—being 20 percent or more over the appropriate weight for age and height. The statistics on children who are “only” overweight are even more alarming!

So, what's going on?

Can Love Be Fattening?

As I pointed out in *Surviving the Cerebral Jungle* in Part 5, there is little separation between children's behavior, family, and environment. Actions taken now, such as forcing a child to finish their dinner or rewarding them with sweets, may seem innocent enough, but is it really in their best interest?

By now, the answer should be obvious. The old adage “a chubby baby is a healthy baby” still holds true during the first year or two of life. But babies who do not have the proper parental guidance regarding healthy eating habits face the prospect of becoming obese children, which can lead to other self-perpetuating health problems. Obese children have physical health problems in addition to the psychological issues that develop from their interactions with peers and communities. Diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, sleep apnea, and heart problems—ailments typically associated with aging adults—are showing up in overweight kids. And if seeing children struggle with physical and mental problems is not enough, there are even more studies that show direct connections among childhood obesity, adult obesity, and an increase in mortality. An estimated 50 percent of obese adolescents will not lose their “baby fat” and will become obese adults.

The problem starts at home; but with your help, it can end there. Our children eat thousands of calories sitting in front of the television. Simply restricting little Jane from eating a whole bag of corn chips while watching cartoons after school, is not the solution. The problem is a complex network of environmental, social, economic, dietary, psychological, and physical parameters. Exercise is at the top of the list for intervention, but it must be combined with changes in eating habits.

We are a nation that has replaced “hide and go seek” and kickball with computer games and blogs. Children watch more TV than ever, sitting in soft chairs without even having to move to change a channel. They spend countless hours on computers playing video games and surfing the Internet. If obesity is already part of a child's genetic pool, these sedentary trends are all the more serious.



Can Love Be Fattening?

I find it alarming that we now live in a society in which it is all but impossible to avoid the foods that are making America's children fat. Community highways and byways are littered with fast food places that lure children with enticing promotions—rue the parent that deprives Billy of a Kiddie Meal with a toy surprise inside! Food manufacturers have made it convenient and enticing for moms to serve kids a steady diet of chicken fingers, fries, pizza, and macaroni and cheese. School cafeterias are no better. These are foods that contain high fat, loads of sugar, and tons of salt. Read the labels: You'll see hundreds of milligrams of sodium in every serving.

Television's inherent sedentary venue is not the only problem that contributes to our children's diminishing fitness and unhealthy eating habits. The advertising on the cartoon channels alone is relentless. How many servings does your child consume in just one episode of *Sponge Bob Square Pants*? It's almost understandable why parents give up and give in. They rationalize that it is better than eating nothing. But is it? It may be better for the parents because it makes their lives easier, creates a positive (but artificial) eating experience, and makes the child happy. It is for that moment of happiness that most parents say yes.

Fifteen percent of babies face the prospect of becoming obese children.....

Instead of occasional "special treats" like most kids of 30 years ago were given, today's children are given "special treats" daily. And why not? They have never been cheaper and more available.

Here is the hard truth: Misguided media, peer, and family influences are the major contributor to the current childhood obesity epidemic in our country. The sad part is that it is rationalized as being a result of love, concern, fun or other good intentions. Whether it is a celebration, favorite holiday, sleep over with friends, an eat-and-run home environment, admonishments about starving children in Africa, or discipline enforced with food rewards, these tactics can collectively set the scene for psychological and physical disaster.

In all fairness, parents are concerned about how their children eat, but most don't recognize that something is wrong because bad eating habits are so commonplace that they are perceived as normal. The parents that do try to do something about it often go about it the wrong way. For example, did you know that restricting unhealthy foods can often make children want them more? Studies have shown that when certain foods are made "off limits," children are more apt to eat them when they are at school and away from parental supervision. The child's mind sets up a pattern that actually associates hunger with the forbidden foods! Each time certain foods are denied, the resulting commotion connects with the natural hunger pangs. Then when the unhealthy items become available in or out of the home, children will actually eat more of them than they would have if they were not on the restricted list.

Other studies found a correlation between parental concern about a child's weight and an increase in total fat mass. Bottom line: Nagging children about their unhealthy weight is not the way to solve the problem.

Restricting unhealthy foods can often make children want them more.....

Divine Information

So what are we to do? First, be thankful—and then think before you act. We live in the information age. Access to past and present research and advice is literally a few finger strokes away on the Internet. Also, awareness of childhood obesity is high on the list of medical concerns now. Government and privately funded programs are investigating ways to positively influence schools, fast food restaurants, convenience stores, food manufacturers, and advertisers. It is a great start, but we need to apply more attention and political pressure to this issue before it is resolved.

In the meantime here are a few pointers for parents to help their little ones:

- Make vegetables, fruit, nuts, and healthy grains visible and available at home.
- Keep a variety of these foods in an attractive bowl or plate and leave it out within hands' reach.
- Make it known that snacking from this dish is encouraged. Set an example and snack from it yourself.
- Go on family vacations that include activities such as riding bikes, playing catch, going to museums, walking after dinner, etc.
- Do not keep luncheon meats, cakes, pies, and other processed foods in the refrigerator. Make sandwiches with unprocessed peanut butter, tuna packed in water, and meats such as sliced fresh turkey or chicken instead. If they never start on the unprocessed items, they'll never miss them.
- Allow your children to eat unhealthy snacks occasionally, but avoid calling attention to it. Don't make it a big deal or use it as a reward.
- When dining out with your children, only go to restaurants that have healthy options on the menu. Lead by example when ordering.
- Create a positive family eating environment, one in which the family dines together most of the time (rather than some of the time) and eating is not rushed.
- Never eat in front of the TV.
- Never eat separately from your children or put children at a separate table.
- Allow your children to leave the table with food remaining on their plates if they say they are full. Rather, encourage them to ask for just the amount of food that they think they want, and then ask for more only if they are still actually hungry.
- Reward them with activities or projects they enjoy, like arts and crafts. Never use food as a reward.
- Encourage organized school sports, spontaneous play, or any type of physical activity—anything that discourages a sedentary lifestyle.
- Set time limits on television, video games, and recreational Web surfing.
- Do not pressure or punish children who are not interested in performing specific athletic activities. This can encourage them to seek comfort in food. Rather, let them discover physical activities they enjoy and then encourage them.
- Seek professional help, if necessary, starting with your family practitioner, a dietitian or nutritionist, or psychological counselor.



Divine Information

Parents, friends, and family members, get involved! It is the best and most effective way to demonstrate love and caring. Studies show that children who eat meals with their families consume more fruits and vegetables, fewer soft drinks, and less total food volume both at home and away from home. There are also lower rates of weight gain in homes where children have reduced television-viewing time. Less television time means more time for activities that burn calories and reduces exposure to advertisements for unhealthy foods targeted at children.

Simply getting involved with your children will automatically decrease their sedentary time without having to apply restrictions. The process of parental and teacher involvement has already been shown to reduce the incidence of childhood obesity. And it also has been shown that the teachers and parents involved became more knowledgeable and lost weight themselves!

As a parent, you have the power to help stop the rising obesity rate among children. Here is a chance to help those you care about the most and take a step in the right direction yourself. An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure in this arena. Set a good example by eating healthy and exercising as a family and on your own. We all want the best for our children, so take your Body of Knowledge and create a family tradition that truly shows your love for them and generations to come.