

Three times as many children are overweight today as compared with 20 years ago. If you think back to your own childhood, it's probably not hard to figure out why this is the case. Twenty years ago, kids didn't have many computer games and not nearly as many TV channels. Kids were more likely to have regular PE at school and there was less worry for parents about kids playing outside safely. There also were not nearly as many fast food places or super sized soft drinks. The reason that childhood overweight has gone up over the last 20 years is because the environment (or surroundings) has changed. It is easy to eat a lot of calories and difficult to get enough exercise to burn up all of those calories.

Childhood overweight is caused by many factors. Some of those we can change and some we cannot. For example, a person has no control over their genetics (or heredity) and genetics have a major influence on a person's tendency to be thin or heavy. The things that we can change are related to lifestyle—making healthy food choices and being physically active. Some lifestyle factors are easier to change than others. For example, it may not be possible for a child to walk to school because of safety issues. But the child's family could choose to take a bike ride after dinner twice a week. Also, a community might work together to change the environment so it's easier for kids to be physically active. For example, a neighborhood could advocate for a swimming pool, so more kids have a chance to swim nearby.

This article describes several things parents can do to help prevent or manage childhood overweight including: eating more fruits, vegetables and dairy foods, drinking fewer sugary drinks, increasing active play time and decreasing TV time, and eating meals together as a family. It also gives suggestions of ways to increase your child's self esteem.

## **Ideas for increasing fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products in kids' diets:**

Research has shown that increasing these foods in children's diets can help them achieve a healthy weight. Following are some ideas to help your child eat more of these:

### **Fruits and vegetables**

- Keep fruit in a bowl on the countertop.
- Make smoothies with frozen fruit, milk (or soymilk) and yogurt.
- Serve fruit for breakfast, snacks and instead of dessert.
- Have kids munch on fresh cut-up veggies when they are hungry before dinner.
- Serve veggies at meals. Have kids pick the vegetables to have at dinner.
- Be a role model—eat a variety of vegetables.

### **Milk**

- Serve milk (1% or nonfat) at meals.
- Keep yogurt and string cheese on hand for snacks.
- Make chocolate milk with 1% milk and just a little chocolate syrup.
- Make oatmeal with milk instead of water.
- Make smoothies with milk or yogurt and get creative with other ingredients.
- Add low fat mozzarella cheese to tacos, pizzas or burritos.
- Be a role model—eat a variety of dairy products

## **Ideas for decreasing sugary drinks:**

Children drink an average of two soft drinks a day. This is equal to 15 teaspoons of sugar a day. Think about what your child drinks during the day. How much milk? Water? Sugary drinks? Where do they get sugary drinks? At home? School? Do they buy them at fast food places or convenience stores? Now think of ways they might be able to drink less of a sugary drink and more water or milk. Ideas might include:

- Drink milk or water instead of soda at meals.
- Have the child carry a water bottle.
- Remind kids that when you're thirsty, water is the very best thirst quencher.
- Put money saved from not buying soda in a jar and spend on a family outing.
- Keep cold water in the refrigerator.
- Put a cooler with ice water and cups outside where kids are playing
- Be a role model—make water your main beverage.

What about fruit juice? In some fruit drinks, juice is a very small part of the drink and the fruit drink is similar to a soft drink. One hundred percent fruit juice can contribute important nutrients like vitamin C to a child's diet. However, even juice that is 100% fruit juice has a lot of calories (about 120 calories per cup). The best choice is to eat the whole fruit, which has fiber, other nutrients and fewer calories.

## **Ideas for increasing active time and decreasing “screen time” for children**

Children watch an average of more than three hours of TV a day and this doesn't include any time spent watching videos or playing computer games. (The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children spend no more than two hours a day watching TV or videos.) More than half of kids over eight have a TV in their room. Watching TV actually causes a person's metabolism to go down. Even quiet activities such as reading or drawing burn more calories than watching TV. Also, as kids get older they spend less time being physically active. This is especially true for girls. Think about: What does your child do when he gets home from school? On evenings? On weekends? How much time is your child watching TV or

videos or playing computer games? How much time is spent being active.

## **Ideas for decreasing TV and other “screen” time and increasing active time might include:**

- Set a limit on TV/video/computer time per day.
- Go on family walks or bike rides.
- Do “silly dancing” to favorite music.
- Plan outside time with simple toys like balls, hula hoops or jump ropes.
- Give sports equipment or active toys for holiday or birthday gifts.
- Walk to school.
- Go on outings to the park.
- Join a team sport the child is interested in.
- Be a role model—get active yourself, especially play with your kids.

## **Ideas for encouraging appropriate serving sizes**

Parents of overweight children are often concerned that the child is eating way too much. This can lead to a power struggle between the parent and child. It is important to remember that the goal for most children is not to lose weight, but rather to maintain their weight or slow their weight gain. Then, as they continue to grow taller they will grow into their weight. If parents are controlling and restrict how much a child eats, this will actually backfire, and the child will want to eat even more and can develop behaviors such as sneaking food.

Parents need to make sure that the pantry and refrigerator are stocked with nutritious foods and that these foods are served at meals and snacks. Foods like chips or cookies shouldn't be eaten frequently, but it's OK to have “treats” occasionally. Banning these types of foods completely can lead to kids eating too much of them when they do get a chance to eat them.

Kids need to learn to “listen to their stomachs” to know when they are hungry and when they get full. Kids need to be allowed to eat enough at meals so they leave feeling satisfied. Most children can learn to recognize when they are hungry and full and will not overeat. However, some children don't seem to be able to control how much they eat as well as others. A child may also have a particular “problem food” that she tends to overeat on. For example, a child may love pasta and want to eat several large servings. If a

child really seems to be overeating on a regular basis, a parent can give guidance to the child to help them recognize when they've had enough food. This should always be done in a positive loving manner, not in any way that berates or embarrasses the child. Some strategies that might help a child eat less of a problem food or control the amount of food s/he eats include:

- Ask the child if her tummy is really still hungry.
- Don't have large amounts of food on the table.
- Remove problem foods from the table after everyone has had one or two servings.
- Put food away right after the meal is over.
- Have everyone in the family eat at the same time, so food is not out later to tempt the child.
- Occasionally measure out serving sizes.
- Don't order super sizes at restaurants or split them among several family members.
- Be a role model—eat reasonable portion sizes.

### **Ideas for making time for family meals**

Children who eat meals together with their families have more nutritious diets. In our hectic world, it can be difficult to get everyone to the table at the same time for a meal. But often with a little planning ahead and getting the whole family involved, it is possible. Think about often you eat together as a family now. Then think about the reasons it isn't happening as often as you would like. See if you can think of possible solutions. Some ideas might include:

- Have dad (or mom) get home from work earlier, so the family can eat together.
- Use a slow cooker to prepare a main dish that cooks when you're away so dinner can be on the table quickly before family members are off to evening activities.
- Make sure everyone keeps their schedules free for several evenings a week.
- Have kids help prepare the meal.
- Turn off the TV.
- Have a set time for dinner so everyone can plan to be home at that time.

### **Ideas for improving your child's self esteem:**

Because of the stigma that being overweight has in our society, overweight children often have lower self esteem and more depression as compared with other children. This is very sad and unfortunate. Parents can have a big role in helping their child feel good about themselves. A child who feels good about himself is more likely to make changes like trying a new sport.

#### **Some ways a parent can help a child have good self esteem are:**

- Let your child know that you love him just the way he is—say it often.
- Praise your child for things she does well (and do it in front of others).
- Praise your child when he makes good food choices or does things to increase his physical activity.
- Let your child know that kids' bodies come in different shapes and sizes and every body is a good body.
- Let other children in the family know it is not OK to tease the overweight child because of her size.
- Talk to the teacher if the child is getting teased at school.
- Talk to the child about how to handle teasing.
- Have your child get involved in activities that he enjoys doing and talk about those.
- Have your child get involved in community service projects with you or with children's organizations.

## **Going further**

Think about ways you could get involved with your child's school or your community to improve the physical activity and nutrition environment for children. Most schools have parent organizations that can influence things like which foods are sold during the school day or after school activities available for kids. Teams are also being formed in many New Mexico school districts that are partnering with health professionals, parents and community members to improve schools. Your city's Parks and Recreation Department may also be a place where you can get involved to make playgrounds and activity programs more available and affordable for families.

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