

THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY

By Dr. Donald L. Shifrin, Overlake Pediatrician, Member of the National Task Force on Obesity and the American Academy of Pediatrics

If you're concerned about your child's weight, you are not alone. The data shows that children are indeed more obese and less active, which can lead to weight gain—and accompanying health problems—in adulthood. Additional weight impacts children's health, and can affect self-esteem and social acceptance. While there's no simple solution, one fact is clear: Parents are at ground zero as nutritional and activity role models, and as the primary source for meal schedules and food choices.

First, a word about encouragement. Food (and weight gain) is emotionally laden. Parents should never single out only one child as needing to change his or her eating habits. The entire family should take this on, with the explanation, "We all are going to try to eat healthier because we want to feel our best, have energy and take good care of ourselves." Make it a family program without drawing negative attention to the youngster whose weight you are concerned about.

Some families adopt a policy of being overly restrictive about food, which can backfire, leading to cravings, overeating and secret binging. Many families have poor meal schedules, which may lead to additional grazing, or snacking, all day. Make time for a well-balanced breakfast, lunch and dinner (along with an afternoon snack for school-aged children). Discuss healthy alternatives to traditional snacks and less healthy meal choices. When meals are served at regular times each day, it can regulate many overeating or oversnacking cycles. I can't stress enough the importance of avoiding watching TV while you eat family meals because the added distraction can lead to overeating and decreases family time.

Growing bodies need good fuel, so make healthful food choices by limiting processed foods (generally sold in the center aisles of the grocery store), and frequent forays for fast food. Children under age 2 have special growth and nutritional needs, and for them low-fat eating is not

HELPFUL WEB SITES

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www.kidsnutrition.org
www.childrensobesityaction.org
www.overlake.staywellknowledgebase.com

nutritionally appropriate. By age 5, a child's diet should be similar to a healthy adult's: a lot of fruits, vegetables, nuts (although not under age 4) and whole grains, and low in fat, sugar and red meat. For picky eaters, get creative and include "stealth" vegetables by chopping or food-processing them and adding to sauces. Remember too that pizza with tomato sauce (think vegetables here), light amounts of cheese and even a whole-wheat crust may entice even the pickiest eater. Offer a wide variety of nutritious food choices. Let kids help choose foods to buy, and teach them the joys of cooking by having them help prepare (safely) foods for the family.

As parents it is your job to provide healthy food, but it not your job to try to make your picky eater actually eat it. Remember, some foods need to be seen being eaten by the family many times before they may even be sampled. Don't cater to the selective eater; keep offering a range of healthy options for the whole family and then resist the urge to try to force your child to eat. Mealtime should be enjoyable and not guilt-inducing. Food is about nutrition and health, not about love.

Focus on a healthful eating style, not on reducing fat intake. Eating more healthfully over time will usually cause less rapid weight gain in children. (This will take advantage of their natural height growth with less weight gain to change their body type.) The surprising thing is that eating for good health—and eating to control weight—are virtually the same, and no one should wind up feeling deprived.

Remember to strive for balance and not be over-controlling. Depriving and being overly restrictive about treats like candy, ice cream, pizza and the ever-popular trip to fast-food

restaurants, will only result in resentment. Birthdays are celebrated in grade school, and parents bring in cupcakes, donuts, even root-beer floats. Your child should feel fine about enjoying occasional treats, but taught that they should be enjoyed in moderation. Should you add a high sugar dessert on top of a big treat at a party? Probably not. Use good judgment, stay committed to taking good care of the family's health and remember you are the primary role model. A healthy diet can include any food in moderation.

Promote regular physical activity by walking, playing tag, hiking, swimming or bicycling as a family—whatever you enjoy. Make activities pleasurable and a part of your together time, so children associate family physical activity with enjoyment. This lays the groundwork for a lifetime of being active. Activity helps control weight, decreases stress and increases self-esteem. Limit and monitor your child's screen time on the TV, computer and with video games to only certain periods of the day or week. Encourage outdoor play. Most kids who spent part of each day outside end up being much more active.

Ellyn Satter, author of "Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family," urges parents to realize that they are responsible for the "what, where and when of feeding," and children are responsible for how much—and whether—they eat. Her thesis is that when parents focus on their job, and not try to battle children on quantity, the result is a healthier relationship with food and a slowed weight gain. The point is not weight loss. Rather parents should allow the process of better eating and attitudes gradually benefit the child who then naturally grows taller and leaner.

Talk with your pediatrician and have him or her plot your child's growth rate over the last two to four years along with his or her body mass index, or BMI, (ratio of height to weight) to portray a clearer picture of her growth status: underweight, normative weight or overweight.