

# Childhood Fitness and Obesity

How to reduce obesity in children utilizing good nutrition and exercise



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## **What is obesity?**

Obesity is defined as weighing greater than what is generally considered a healthy weight based on height. While some children may be large-boned or have a genetic predisposition to becoming overweight, nonetheless obesity in children has become a pandemic in our society. It is a dangerous prelude to health conditions which may occur as a result of being overweight.

Here are some startling statistics: In 2000, 15.3% of children ages 6-11, and 15.5% of adolescents ages 12-19 were overweight. Between 1999 and 2000, over 10 percent of younger preschool children between the ages of 2 and 5 are overweight; up 7% from 1994. In addition, the National Health Center for Statistics indicates that only 25% of young people engage in some form of exercise; 25% do not exercise at all; and the percentage of children who have been defined as overweight has doubled since the 1970s.

We all know that obesity can cause health conditions such as diabetes; cardio vascular disease; cholesterol; high blood pressure; and sleep apnea. In addition, children who are obese have a much greater chance of continuing on this road as evidenced by another statistic which revealed that one third of overweight adults were obese as children.

In trying to determine how to counteract the obvious results of being an obese child, proper diet and exercise is a major factor. A child who maintains a healthy weight will less likely become overweight as an adult. However, there are other factors which contribute to a child becoming overweight, and we will explore

these and other causes in this report. We will also discuss how we can help our children to maintain a healthy diet and engage in appropriate exercise.



### **What factors contribute to childhood obesity?**

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“They used to say I was born with a fork in my mouth,” one woman exclaimed. She goes on to say, “My weight at birth was 5 pounds, yet as a child I began to gain weight, and the struggle to lose the weight has carried over into my adult years. While I do not consider myself to be obese, according to today’s standards of height and weight distribution, I probably am. I think I inherited the weight gene from my father’s side of the family, as they are all large-boned and carry a fair amount of weight as well.”

Does this scenario sound familiar? The sad truth is that childhood obesity 20 years ago was looked upon as the child being healthy. No measures were taken to control the weight gain. Today, however, society has mandated that thin is in, and this is one of the factors which contribute to childhood obesity. What does one thing have to do with the other? Every child today is exposed to TV commercials, magazines, and other forms of propaganda which insist that to be thin is to be accepted. If a child is overweight, an affect of this societal acclamation may induce low self-esteem among children. As a result the child will eat more and exercise less.

Another factor in childhood obesity is fast food restaurants. With one or both adults working and not being able to monitor a child's eating habits, the child will most likely eat at fast food chains. This is especially true of middle school kids who may have working parents, and who visit these fast food chains for breakfast and lunch.

While it is true that most schools have changed their lunch menus to include healthier and nutritious meals; if there is a fast food chain within the vicinity of the school, kids will inevitably eat there. If school-aged kids want to eat a hamburger and fries from a fast food joint, they will find a way. Check out any of these places on a typical day at 3 p.m. and you will find hoards of kids buying meals.

This brings up another factor. Many of these fast food places, specifically well-known big companies, have specifically set up their premises near and around schools. They know they are targeting kids, and are contributing to the obesity problem in our society, but there's a lot of money in the fast food trade.

In New York, for example, the Mayor has proposed that all restaurants get rid of Trans fat in their meal preparations. The fast food chains as well as other restaurants took offense to this proposal because they knew they would lose business – especially from kids.

When we were kids, we used to take our lunch to school. It would consist of a healthy sandwich, milk, and a piece of fruit. Today, while some parents may follow this regimen, more often than not there are those parents who simply leave money on the counter for their child to buy whatever they wish for lunch.

Yet, on any given day, some moms take their children to McDonald's or Burger King for lunch; specifically because it's convenient. Perhaps they went shopping and later, the little kids said they were hungry. Whether in a mall or not, it is very

easy to grab some fast food to alleviate the hunger. Without realizing it, however, they may be contributing to a child's weight gain by doing so. This is not an indictment on parents; it is the world we live in. Whatever is easier, convenient, and fast has become the rule rather than the exception. Perhaps someone will soon fill the need for kid-friendly restaurants where you can grab a quick bite to eat that's a little healthier.

Another contributing factor is food preparation at home. If we, as parents, order pizza and Chinese food and bring home prepared meals from fast food restaurants, we are sending a clear message that these foods are appropriate as meals and not as treats once in a while. Now this is not to suggest that every parent engages in this practice. With healthy diets and exercise becoming part of everyone's conscious, there are certainly more parents today who are preparing nutritional meals and engaging their kids in different forms of exercise. Yet, obesity is a problem and one which has to be recognized and dealt with on a daily basis.

While we, as adults, struggle with weight on a daily basis, it can certainly be said we do not want the same for our children. It's a delicate balance, however. Children who are overweight are teased by their peers; made to feel inadequate, and thus look to food to make them feel better about themselves. We all know this to be true. As adults, if we are feeling anxious or stressed out, we look for that piece of chocolate or a piece of cake believing somehow it will make us feel better as well.

But for children, it is more serious. Being taunted by peers on how they look adds more pressure and tips the scale in their quest to fit in. Therefore, one of two things will occur; either they will eat more because they can't lose weight; or they will starve themselves in an effort to become more popular among their peers.

Either way, their self-esteem dictates how they treat their bodies. There have been countless cases wherein peer pressure and parent pressure has pushed children one way or the other.

One woman commented, “As a child, I was not aware I was fat. Once I started school I was made fun of all the time. Even though my parents said I was beautiful, I didn’t really believe it. As an adult, dark clothes became my friend. My self-esteem was at an all time low, and even though I had tried many diets, I would gain the weight back, and then some. My parents never forced me to eat; our meals were portioned and nutritious. I think my lack of self-worth fed into my need to eat. After all, if no one was going to notice me; why not eat? I was embarrassed because the stores my mom took me to for clothes never had my size. I had to go to special stores. Even today, I buy plus sizes. When I think about those childhood times, it brings back pain I’d rather forget.”

Childhood obesity, with all of its consequential health problems, should also be looked at from the emotional as well as the physical pain it causes. We pay so much attention on food being the source and how we are perceived; we forget there are other emotional factors which play a vital role in obese children.



## **How do we put our kids on the right track to healthier eating?**

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It all begins at the beginning. If we approach childhood obesity as we would with any other disease, we can counteract its affects on our children. From the day children are born, it is up to parents to engage in a proper dietary regimen. Instead of soft drinks, give your child water or skim milk. The idea is not to limit their food intake, but to prepare healthier foods which your child can eat often.

Moreover, if your child is overweight, try not to make it a point of discussion as it will only lower his or her self-esteem, and the child will eventually use food as a crutch. A child with a high sense of esteem will more likely than not be more open to a dietary regimen than children who see themselves as fat and ugly. Healthy food can be prepared without sacrificing any of the nutrients a child needs in his or her daily diet.

If your child's doctor determines a diet is in order, then it is appropriate that the entire family become involved. There are so many wonderful ways in which you can prepare a healthy meal for your family; one that is rich in fiber and low in fat. There is no need to prepare a separate meal for the child; this will only advance the notion there is something wrong. The entire family can eat healthy meals together and this includes snacks as well.

Having healthy snacks on hand can be enjoyed by all, without making it seem as if the focus is “the diet.”

Have an abundance of fruits and vegetables in your home; along with chicken, fish and lean meats. Instead of a hamburger, prepare a turkey burger. It is just as nutritious and delicious as the beef. Try to steer clear of packaged foods such as Mac and cheese. This is very high in sodium and you can easily make it using low fat cheese instead.

Prepare salads with chicken; yogurt as a snack; Portobello mushrooms in place of beef; beans and escarole; soups low in sodium; English muffin pizzas, and healthy cereals filled with high fiber instead of sugar. There are plenty of nutritionists on Food TV who prepare healthy meals for the entire family as well.

When out and about shopping with the children, avoid fast food restaurants. Bring fruit or other snack foods which the children can nibble on. If they have been the recipient of a proper diet from day one, they will continue to eat healthy foods and shy away from fatty foods from fast foods places. If your child has lost weight; praise him or her.

And it’s okay to eat desserts, as long as it’s in moderation. Make an angel food cake, which is very low in fat, and the whole family can enjoy. Or perhaps prepare gelatin desserts which are not only healthy but fun to eat. There are a number of ways the entire family can engage in helping a child diet, and at the same time lend emotional support to the overweight child.

A woman commented, “Whenever my sister was mad at me, she would always call me fat. Even my father called me fat one time. It hurt so much. My mother always told me I looked beautiful, even though I knew I wasn’t. I wasn’t considered obese then, but my large frame made it difficult for me to wear

smaller sizes. I was a size 16 in my teens, and this made it more difficult to buy clothes in my size. It just didn't seem fair, because my sister was skinny. I did the best I could, but inside I felt awful all the time."



### **How can we engage our children in exercise?**

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We live in an electronic age in which our kids are sitting in front of the TV for hours playing Nintendo or Xbox or whatever the newest game appears on the scene. Moreover, with computers playing a major role in their education, they can be sitting for hours engaging in homework assignments or chatting online.

Some of the ways in which we can get our children to exercise more often is to put a restriction on the amount of time they watch TV. While recess time at school is limited to 40 minutes, most kids just hang out; rarely participating in any type of exercise. It is up to parents then to set the tone for an exercise program in which the entire family can participate in.

Give them break times after school and invite other children over to play.

Children need to get rid of all that pent up energy. Have your child walk the dog, if you have one. This is great exercise. On weekends, the entire family can go to the local park and engage in sports activities. Take walks after dinner; or go for a bike ride.

In addition, most schools today have after school sports activities which your child can join. Perhaps they can even join their school or community little league. Regardless of the sport, children need to exercise when they are young and still growing. Instead of taking the car to the mall, walk there with your child, if you can. Buy a basketball hoop for your backyard, or soccer net. No exercise is too minimal. Participating in exercise as a family can be a wonderful asset to the child, and build self-esteem as well.



### **Obesity and self-esteem are synonymous in controlling weight gain**

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As mentioned in the opening of this report, obesity is a pandemic, but more importantly it can cause great emotional stress on any child faced with being overweight. It is important that we not only address the weight issue, but the underlying turbulence associated with this condition. We have to reach out to overweight children and not bemoan the fact they are heavy, but help them to achieve all they want in life by giving them the tools and the direction to achieve success.

While children will always be competing with their peers for attention, and while there will always be advertisements promoting thinness as being the ultimate way to look; we have to emphasize to our children that it is not how they look, but how they can maintain a healthy diet and exercise program which keeps them strong and free from disease.

As parents, we love our children and would do anything for them. All we can do is ride the storm with them in a supportive and loving manner. Dieting is not easy; and children should never be given any substances to curb their eating habits; but we can recognize that weight issues can be genetic; can be a result of inner angst; and can be a call for help.

We need to listen; become proactive; and give our kids the attention and unwavering commitment to see them through this difficult time.