

Family Living Connection

Julie Keown-Bomar, Family Living Educator

Preventing Weight Disorders

Many American parents today are faced with a serious threat to their children’s health. Public health officials have flatly stated that America is facing an epidemic of overweight and obesity and that the youngest victims are likely to bear a lifetime of poor health. Over the past 20 years, overweight among children aged 6-11 has more than doubled, from 7% in 1980 to 15% in 2000.¹ Far more than a problem of appearance or acceptance, childhood obesity leads to physical and mental health problems and has enormous economic costs on our health care system. On the other end of the spectrum, plenty of children are engaging in restrictive diets or using diet drugs to shed pounds and inches in an attempt to reach an unrealistic body shape. What’s a parent to do?

Our greatest hope of prevention is teaching children positive attitudes and healthy alternatives at an early age. Just saying “no” to junk foods or risky diets is not enough. Parents have to guide children into healthy eating, positive body image, and lifelong fitness.

One of the most important lessons we can teach our children is that all bodies need to be well fed and kept fit for the sake of health. Even well cared for bodies will come in different normal sizes and shapes.² The critical issues are whether or not we are eating healthy and getting sufficient physical activity. The challenge is that most people in American are not. Surrounded by high-fat, high-sugar and super-sized portions of

food and inactive entertainment (like TV and video games), unhealthy fatness seems to be winning out.

The good news is that parents are the most influential educators and role models for children. Until the age of twelve or thirteen, kids are almost completely reliant on parents or other caregivers to offer a selection of food. Filling those early years with diverse and nutritious foods, and adequate physical activity can start a lifetime pattern of healthy living.



Parenting styles have been associated with children’s weight status and dietary intake. Research shows these practices have the best results:

- Adults encourage children to eat healthy foods, but also give them some healthy choices;
- Structure regular, predictable and pleasant eating times;
- Start with small servings and let children ask for more if they are not full. Let children decide when they are full

A good place to start becoming more aware of good nutrition is the new food pyramid. It is available from the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, 703-305-7600 and at www.usda.gov/cnpp/pyrabklt.pdf

For starters, here are some healthy recommendations:

- Offer food made mostly from whole grain at each meal. Look for the label *whole grain* because some labels seem wholesome, but are misleading. Typically, kids who are provided whole-grain breads, pasta,

¹ “Childhood Obesity” Wisconsin Brief 05-7, March 2005.

² Kater, Kathy. Real Kids Come in All Sizes. 2004.

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and cereal, grow up contentedly eating these foods as teens. If kids are only provided white bread, white rice and white-flour pasta, their taste buds may need make-overs. Help kids visualize that highly refined grains, like white flour or rice, are relatively empty of nutrients, while those rougher, browner whole-grain foods are loaded with good fuel.³

- Buy and serve more fruits and vegetables (fresh, frozen, or canned). Strive for a goal of five servings per day of vegetables and fruit. Encourage your kids to think back on the day and count their servings. Let your child help choose fruits and vegetables at the store.

- Offer variety and introduce new foods. Don't get discouraged if your child doesn't like a food. Some kids will need to have a food served to them 10 times or more before they will eat it.

- Promote healthy body images. Adolescents who feel dissatisfied with their bodies are at higher risk for future binge eating, smoking, poor eating, and decreased physical activity, according to new research from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.⁴

- Plan more family meals together. Research shows that family meals can play a major role in preventing

eating disorders, especially in adolescent girls.⁵ Family meals promote healthy communication and allow parents to become role models for healthier eating.

- Kids need a total of about 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Short 10-minute bouts of activity throughout the day are just fine, but work toward 60 minutes total. Limit TV, video games and computer time. Or, try making a deal that inactive entertainment, like video games and TV, can only be allowed after kids get adequate physical activity. Going for a bike ride or shooting hoops can earn TV time, for example.



For more information about family nutrition and fitness see:

http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/index.html Provides information about nutrition and fitness for kids.

www.kidnetic.com Provides healthy eating and physical activity tips for kids and parents.

³ Kater, Kathy. Real Kids Come in All Sizes. 2004, p. 166.

⁴ "Teens dissatisfied with their bodies at higher risk for weight gain, poor health." <http://www.sph.umn.edu/news/info/teens/home.html> October 20, 2006.

⁵ "Family Meals Benefit Health." The Minnesota Daily. November 11, 2004.