



Joan E. LeFebvre  
Family Living Agent

# Parenting the Preschooler

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/pp/>

## Your Child's Weight

At least one child in five is overweight or at risk of overweight and the number of overweight children continues to grow.

How can you tell if your child is overweight? As a parent, you may not be able to tell because children normally come in many sizes. Some children are going to be taller and heavier while others will be shorter and lighter. The best person to determine if your child is overweight is your health care provider, who determines if your child is overweight by measuring his or her height and weight. Then your child's height and weight will be placed on a growth chart. You can help by providing your child's height and weight at different ages since birth. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) developed charts that show children's weight ranges at different ages.

### What Factors Lead To Overweight Children?

Children become overweight for a variety of reasons. The most common causes are genetic factors, lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating patterns, or a combination of these factors.

Genetics alone do not explain the dramatic increase in overweight seen in children in recent years. Even though genes will tell us a lot about someone's susceptibility to becoming overweight, they're not the reason why there has been an increase in the numbers of overweight children. With genetics ruled out, attention turns to the balance between the amount of calories kids eat and how much physical activity they get.

Childhood overweight may also be influenced by differences in timing of growth during the early years.

As rates of overweight in children continue to rise, researchers are searching for answers as to why certain children gain more fat than other children. Are there certain ages (5-6 years) that are especially "risky" for gain in body fatness? Is fatness related to the level of physical activity or to dietary factors or both? One recent study found overweight four to seven year old children had a higher consumption of fat, protein, and total calories than children of a healthy weight.

Studies have looked at overweight children and attempted to find similar characteristics among them. The factors that were associated with overweight children were:

- having one or both parents overweight or obese
- living in smaller families
- being economically poor
- consuming a high proportion of calories from fat
- being avid TV watchers

### How Can You Influence Your Child?

- Set up child-friendly environments that will help your child develop healthful eating and physical activity habits.
- Be a role model for your child by practicing healthy eating and exercise habits yourself.
- Have healthy food choices available.
- Schedule regular mealtimes and snack times.
- Encourage active play everyday for your child.

- Limit the availability of high-calorie sweet foods. Ice cream, potato chips, soda, cookies, and even granola bars tempt children to eat when they're not really hungry.
- Have foods like low-fat string cheese, whole wheat crackers, fresh fruits and vegetables and frozen fruit juice popsicle readily available.
- Introduce nutritious foods in a positive way, and at an early age.

**Choose these for meals and snacks...**

**Instead of these...**

Lowfat milk	Whole milk
Unsweetened fruit juice, water	Soda, fruit punch, "Kool-aid"
Broiled meats, cheese, tuna in water, cold meat strips or cubes, hard boiled eggs	Fried meats, hot dogs, lunchmeats
Crackers, breadsticks, melba toast	Chips, cookies
Toast, unsweetened breakfast cereals	"Pop-tarts," presweetened cereals
Baked or boiled potatoes	French fries, fried potatoes
Fresh fruit or fruit canned in juice	Fruit snacks like "gummi" chews and fruit roll-ups
Cooked or raw vegetables	Vegetables with heavy or rich sauces
Pudding made w/lowfat milk, ice milk, or yogurt	Ice cream, sweet desserts, or pastries

**Should I Put My Child On A Low-Calorie Diet?**

Putting your child on a "diet" will cause unnecessary stress for both of you. Low-calorie diets can endanger normal growth and are not recommended for children. It is better to improve the eating and exercise habits of your whole family. Teach your child to listen to his or her internal cues for hunger. Americans tend to "look for something to eat" when they are bored, upset, or tired rather than eating when they are hungry.

Never force your child to eat when not hungry. Encourage your preschooler to follow internal cues for hunger. If you try to make a child eat, not only will you be unsuccessful, but you will lay the groundwork for future food challenges.

**Which will you do?**

**Instead of...**

Give hugs and kisses	Using food as a reward or bribe
Set regular meal and snack times	Letting your child eat <b>whenever</b> he wants
Offer a choice of healthful foods	Letting your child eat <b>whatever</b> he can find
Comfort your child with attention and affection	Quieting your child with "treats"
Use the same limits and foods for the entire family	Setting stricter limits for "pudgy" children than the rest of the family
Prevent distracting activities during mealtime	Letting your child watch TV or play with toys during mealtime

**Sources:**

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As a parent, **you** are responsible  
 for **what** and **when** your child  
 eats and drinks.  
 Your child is responsible  
 for **how much** and **whether** to eat.

Author: JP Ploetz, Nutrition Program Coordinator, UW-Extension  
 Editor: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension  
 Reviewer: Susan Nitzke, Professor, Nutrition Specialist, UW-Madison  
 Layout: Penny Otte, Program Assistant I, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact:  
 Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362,  
 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu  
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