

Childhood Obesity

Parent Fact Sheet #5

Childhood obesity is increasing in the United States (CDC, 2009). Sedentary behavior and the availability of high-fat, calorie-rich foods contribute to increased obesity rates (Anderson and Butcher, 2006). Obese children are at risk for a number of health and emotional disorders (Ogden, Carroll, and Curtin, 2010). Parents should promote healthful foods and activity for their children, but addressing weight issues in a way that does not harm a child's self-esteem can be difficult (Franko and Edwards, 2009). Children are exposed to media messages that focus on body size and composition, so parents need to help their children stay active and choose well-balanced foods.

Key Facts

- 1. Children who are overweight or obese have lower self-esteem than their normal-weight peers** (Strauss, 2000). Parents must help their children understand their physical appearance is not the primary contributor to self-worth. Parents of obese children need to be aware that their children may experience increased feelings of loneliness, sadness, and nervousness. As they get older, children who are obese were more likely to participate in high-risk behaviors such as smoking, alcohol, or drug use (Strauss, 2000). Parents should monitor their children and encourage them to engage in activities that are not high-risk.
- 2. Children are more likely to participate in physically active recreation when their parents are involved as well.** (Lau, Fox, and Cheung, 2005). When children can participate in active recreation with their parents, they are more likely to continue these activities as they grow older. If parents make healthful lifestyle choices, their children are more likely to continue to participate in physical activity once they are adults. Families should try to participate in physical activity together so children understand the importance of a healthful lifestyle.
- 3. Fathers play a critical role in children's understanding of living a healthful lifestyle** (Snethen, et al., 2008). Both parents should demonstrate healthful living habits to their children; however, fathers are especially critical in setting examples for children's lifestyle choices. Children who see their father watching more than five hours of television a day are more likely to be heavy television viewers as adults (Snethen, et al., 2008). Likewise, when children see their fathers eating most of the fruits and vegetables on their plates at meals, they are more likely to do so as well (Snethen, et al., 2008). Families should eat meals together whenever possible so children can learn the importance of a well-balanced diet.
- 4. Children are exposed to significant amounts of advertisements for fast-food and high-calorie junk food** (Thompson, Flores, Ebel, and Christakis, 2008). The



prevalence of advertisements for unhealthy food choices during children's television programming encourages them to prefer these foods (Thompson, et al., 2008). Studies have shown the more television a child watches, the higher his or her preference for foods advertised during their viewing (Thompson, et. al., 2008). If possible, parents should limit their children's television viewing and encourage more active play. In addition, if parents watch these programs with their children they can reinforce the importance of healthful dietary practices and discuss why many of the advertised foods may not be good choices.

Implications for Parents

Parents should encourage their children to get at least one hour of physical activity every day to reduce the risk for obesity. If a child is overweight, his or her parents need to be aware of the child's increased risk of emotional or self-esteem struggles. Parents of children who are overweight can teach children about the importance of physical activity and healthful food choices throughout life. Over-emphasizing weight can create body-image issues, so parents should promote lifestyle choices instead of focusing on weight loss. If possible, families should participate in fitness activities together; children are influenced by the fitness practices of the entire family. Parents should encourage their children to get an hour of physical activity each day and limit their amounts of sedentary behavior.

Additional Resources

Let's Move (<http://www.letsmove.gov/>): This website, started as a result of Michelle Obama's ambition to combat childhood obesity, provides resources for promoting healthful diets and physical activity. Parents can find resources to help them.

My Pyramid (<http://www.mypyramid.gov/>): Parents can look up what an appropriate diet looks like for both themselves and their children. Dietary guidelines and activities to promote healthful diets are available for both adults and children.

About the Author:

Kate Cromwell is a master's degree candidate at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. She is studying recreation and youth development. Her thesis focuses on weight perception of children from diverse ethnic groups.

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