[IMAGE]

How to Help Your Child Avoid Growing Up Fat

By Claudia Anrig, DC

Growing up "fat" is easy to do when 20 percent of all children eat more than three times a week at a fast-food establishment, 13 percent of their average daily calories come from soft drinks, and the average person consumes approximately *140 pounds* of sugar every year. According to the latest estimates, 9 million children in the United States are obese, and this disturbing trend is repeating itself in other countries that embrace a Western diet and sedentary lifestyle.

Childhood obesity is a serious problem that merits serious solutions. Parents need to recognize that in the overwhelming majority of cases, poor lifestyle practices create obesity in their child (ren), which means it will take a commitment by you and the entire family to help change those unhealthy behaviors. Let’s take a quick look at the scope of this ever-growing problem, some of the primary causes, and what we can all do about it. Here’s how to help your child avoid growing up fat.

A Global Epidemic

The World Health Organization considers obesity to be one of the most common nutritional disorders in developed countries and one of the most common chronic illnesses in the Western world, and for good reason: There has been a more than 400 percent increase in the number of obese children since 1982, and up to a third of all children are considered significantly overweight. Recent research suggests one in four overweight children is already showing early signs of type II diabetes and 60 percent of obese children already have at least one risk factor for heart disease.Maintaining an appropriate weight does a whole lot more than help you feel and look better; it also helps you live longer.

image - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The impact of obesity on a child’s health is alarming. Various studies have linked childhood obesity to the following serious illnesses:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Sleep apnea
- Asthma
- Insulin resistance

- Diabetes
- Menstrual irregularities
- Mental health disorders (depression, low self-esteem)

Even worse is the tendency of childhood obesity to continue into adulthood. A recent study found that 77 percent of children with a body mass index greater than the 95th percentile remained obese as adults.

Planting the Seeds of Obesity

While childhood obesity cannot be attributed to any one particular influence, studies have shown that there are several modifiable factors:

- *Inadequate physical activity* - a lack of regular exercise, exacerbated by decreased PE and recess time, particularly in parts of the U.S. and Canada.
- *Sedentary behavior* - spending the majority of time watching TV, surfing the Web and playing video games.
- *Poor eating habits* - overconsumption of high-calorie foods and unhealthy eating patterns, such as eating when not really hungry, eating while watching TV or doing homework, etc.
- *Unhealthy Environment* - overexposure to advertisements that promote high-calorie foods; lack of opportunity for physical activity (e.g., parents not home from work until after dark, limiting or eliminating the opportunity for family or supervised exercise/activities).

These factors are all easily modified when parents recognize how influential they are in these areas, both directly and indirectly. For example, a parent has direct influence by providing an environment that nurtures physical activity and good eating habits in their child(ren), and has indirect influence through modeling - leading by example. Here's an easy success principle to remember: If your child is not active, find a physical activity to do with them. Studies have shown that children 4 to 7 years of age whose parents are physically active are six times more likely to be active than children in the same age group whose parents are inactive.

General Lifestyle Characteristics of the Obese Child

- Busy parents with little or no time for outside activities.
- Children allowed to watch TV or play video games for more than one hour a day.

- Decreased physical activity at school.
- Diet high in fast foods and processed foods.

Healthy Practices: The Wellness Lifestyle

Pick an aerobic physical activity like bicycling, tennis, soccer, etc.; something your entire family will enjoy. Make it a weekly outing at first and then increase it to at least two times a week.

If you pick up your children from school, take a few minutes each day and walk a few laps around the school track with them before coming home. (By the way, that's also a good time to talk about their school day and anything else they may have on their mind.)

- Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark If you are a working parent who works out at a gym, check to see if they will allow your 12-year-old (or older) child to at least use the treadmill.

Offer an award system for physical activity; allow your child (particularly if they are sedentary) 10 minutes of recreation (TV, video games, etc.) for every 10 minutes spent exercising, running or playing outdoors.

Whatever physical activity you choose, pick one the entire family can enjoy. Sometimes, if a child is very active and participates in school sports or Little League, the family may consider game time as family/activity time. This actually can be detrimental to other children in the family, since they may end up sitting in the stands the entire time, usually consuming unhealthy food items.

The Power of Good Food

When making choices to help your child(ren) avoid obesity, consider this: Kids who are physically active and have a diet of fresh vegetables, fruit and healthy protein sources are almost *never* obese. Here are some ways to create a healthy eating environment:

- Implement the same health diet (rich in fruits, vegetables and healthy protein) for the entire family, not just one individual.
- Plan times when you prepare foods together as a family. Children enjoy participating and can learn about healthy cooking and food preparation.
- Eat meals together at the dinner table at regular times.
- Avoid rushing to finish meals. Eating too quickly does not allow enough time to digest the food and

achieve a sense of fullness.

- Avoid other activities during mealtimes such as watching TV or reading.
- Have snack foods available that are low-calorie and nutritious. Fruits, vegetables and raw nuts (almonds, cashews, etc.) are good examples.
- - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Avoid serving portions that are too large and thus encourage overconsumption.
- Avoid forcing your child to eat if they are not hungry, but do not give in later by allowing them to eat snack foods instead of their regular meal.
- Limit fast- food consumption to no more than once every two weeks.
- Avoid using food as a reward or the lack of food as punishment.

With all the negative influences out there these days, it's certainly not easy to establish healthy lifestyle behaviors in your children, but it's important enough to their health (and yours) to make the effort. Your children don't have to grow up overweight and unhealthy, and as a parent, you can help make sure they don't.

Tips for Healthy Eating: Recommended Web Sites

- www.wholefoodsmarket.com/recipes/kids/index.html
- http://1stholistic.com/Recipes/dir-food-diet-articles.htm
- www.mothering.com/sections/recipes/recipes.html
- www.n101.com/HealthNotes/HNs/Healthy_Eating/Guide.htm

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