



by Karen Stephens

Obesity in Childhood: Reducing Your Child's Risk

"Kids' obesity growing trend."

"Report: 1 in 3 kids may get diabetes."

"Study: Many children don't exercise at all."

These news headlines don't predict good futures for children. Overweight children often endure self-esteem and confidence issues as well as physical health complications.

If we fail to reduce obesity rates in children, we prime them for illnesses like heart disease and diabetes. And we'll be the first parents to raise an entire generation with a shorter life expectancy than our own. That's a disappointing legacy we can avoid with conscious effort.

Many factors influence children's weight gain, including genetics and unique biological make-up, which are beyond parent control. Nevertheless, there are ways to combat excess weight-gain and obesity in children.

Weight gain is a matter of taking in more calories than one burns — whether child or adult. Matching your child's quantity of nutrient-filled calorie intake with their daily physical activity will go a long way to reducing the risk of childhood obesity. Parents can help children enjoy regular physical activity and eat more wisely so these habits become second-nature to them as adults.

Increase Family Physical Activity

Humans are built to move, not to sit still or lay back for prolonged hours. Simply moving through play helps children burn calories. And a child who is active on a regular basis not only burns more calories when active, but also when at rest. Increased active play and movement in children's daily lives plays a major role in their weight management.

Children need daily activity that engages both large and small muscles and requires balance and coordination. It will build their body, mind, and self-esteem. Following are ways to do it:

- **Be a good role model.** Children do as you do, not as you say. If you want children to be physically fit, they need to see you working toward that, too.
- **Resist excessive sedentary entertainment.** The sedentary pastimes children experience regularly undermine health. Too many hours sitting in front of television, computer, or video games takes its toll on children's developing bones, muscles, sense of physical competence, and body image. Limiting TV time also protects your children from a barrage of commercials touting low-nutrient foods.
- **Get around by foot more often.** If you live in a safe area for pedestrians, walk to your local library or bike to your corner grocery store. Simply walking around the block after dinner to enjoy a sunset together is a healthful family routine.

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- **Involve children in physically active household chores.** Foster fitness and teamwork by including kids in duties, such as: dusting; vacuuming; broom sweeping; loading and unloading the dishwasher; raking leaves; garden planting, weeding, and harvesting; sorting and packaging recycling; washing car and bikes; feeding and watering pets as well as wildlife; washing windows, shaking out throw rugs, making beds; carrying and shelving groceries; and loading, folding, and carting laundry.
- **Identify safe active play spaces.** If you don't have green space around where you live, investigate local parks, playgrounds or nature reserves. Indoor play areas, such as community gyms or swimming pools, are options, too.

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- **Plan for active play in all kinds of weather.** Don't let "bad" weather turn your child into a couch potato. I've heard it said there is no such thing as bad weather; just bad clothing. Dress your child appropriately and he/she can enjoy active play even in windy or snowy weather.
- **Offer fun active play opportunities.** Leisurely pursuits are the best way to lead children to increased active play. Focus on fun game play, rather than emphasizing skill building alone. Try a wide variety of games to broaden children's interests.

Encourage Wise Eating Habits

Guiding children down the path of good nutrition habits and eating routines is another aspect of weight management that parents heavily influence. Try the following:

- **Build positive attitudes toward all foods by being a good role model.** If you eat a wide variety of nutrient-rich foods, your child is likely to follow your lead. Eat what you want kids to eat. Demonstrate moderation so they learn to eat until satisfied, not stuffed.
- **Set a predictable, scheduled time for meals.** Breakfast, lunch, and supper are all important. A low fat protein, whole grain item, fruit and vegetables with a glass of milk (skim for ages two years and older), is a great meal for kids. A sugary dessert would merely add low nutrient calories.
- **Plan for small, regular snacks between meals.** Keep snack portions modest and avoid high fat and high sugar snacks. When daily schedules are tight, it's tempting to offer kids "easy" snacks of sugary and fatty cookies, cakes, or doughnuts. Those foods offer calories, but they lack the variety of vitamins and minerals kids need to build healthy cell tissue and strong bones. Focus on equally "easy" snacks, such as crackers, vegetable sticks, or fruit.
- **Keep food in perspective.** Teach children food is merely fuel for the body. It provides nutrients we need to grow. It's a birthright; not a special privilege, a weapon, or a substitute for love.
- **Make mealtime a warm, welcoming family ritual.** Turn off the TV and play a relaxing instrumental CD instead. Make togetherness and conversation the focus.
- **Eat at home more often and fix meals together.** Eating at fast food restaurants that feature higher calorie fatty and sugary foods should be the exception, not the rule.
- **Encourage children to drink more water.** Limit sugar-filled soft drinks. Even too many 100% fruit juices can contribute to calorie overload.
- **Provide a variety of nutrient-filled foods.** At snacks or meals, introduce one new food at a time, not several.
- **Cook foods using a variety of methods.** Serve them raw, steamed, broiled, baked, roasted, or toasted, not deep fried.

- **Don't serve huge portions.** Model eating proper portions. An early childhood nutritionist or pediatrician can suggest proper serving sizes.
- **Don't force children into cleaning their plate.** Focus on eating until satisfied.
- **Avoid using food or trips to a fast food restaurant as a reward or punishment.** Food used as a bargaining chip or a form of manipulation sets the stage for future eating disorders.
- **Plant a vegetable garden and/or fruit trees together.** It requires physical activity and children are more likely to try foods they plant and harvest.

So there you have it. If your family eats more wisely and has more fun moving together, you're two giant steps toward reducing your child's risk of obesity. For that, give yourself a pat on the back; you deserve it.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.