

# Downsizing a Super-sized Problem:

## Curbing Childhood Obesity

Eating a balanced diet, exercising, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle in general require vigilance even in the most disciplined adults. Tackling the same dietary and physical challenges are even more difficult for children and adolescents. This is especially true for today's young generation, whose days are filled with computers, fast foods, cars, and the sedentary ways of suburban life. In fact, the dramatic increase in the prevalence of childhood overweight in the United States has led the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to label childhood obesity a national epidemic—affecting more than 9 million children and teens.

The magnitude of the problem extends beyond simply what the scales reveal. Medical problems are common in obese children and adolescents, who frequently suffer from diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, low self-esteem, and depression. The burdens of related medical and financial complications only further exacerbate this growing crisis.

And while family history and genetics have historically served as risk factors for



obesity, environmental factors such as lack of exercise and the nutritional train wrecks often served in restaurants and school cafeterias make the victims of our “sit-down” society more difficult to anticipate and remedy. For parents, prevention is a hallmark of curbing the problem.

### **A Road Map to Health**

Fortunately for parents, there are ways

to navigate the perils of childhood obesity. The following are a few suggestions. For more extensive reading, pick up a copy of the AAP's *A Parent's Guide to Childhood Obesity: A Road Map to Health* by Dr. Sandra G. Hassink (editor-in-chief).

■ **All in the family:** Good health concerns every member of your family, so approach diet and exercise as a family project. Set a good example of the healthy

eating behaviors you want your children to adopt. Children are too smart to accept “do as I say, not as I do.” Enlisting the entire family in the same healthy habits will keep children from feeling singled out or isolated. This will be especially important if one child is overweight. In the evenings and on weekends, invite your family to join you in anything from walking around the block to playing croquet. By encouraging healthy habits

- you prefer that your child not eat.
- 2. Lobby for your child’s school to stock healthy choices such as fresh fruit, low-fat dairy products, water, and 100 percent fruit juice in the vending machines.
- 3. Each 12-ounce soft drink contains approximately 10 teaspoons of sugar and 150 calories. Drinking just one can of soda a day increases a child’s risk of obesity by 60 percent.

## Set a good example of the healthy behaviors you want your children to adopt.

in your children, you will be doing your own body and mind a favor.

■ **A watchful eye:** Routinely assess your children’s eating and activity patterns and watch for excessive weight gain. Talk with your pediatrician about where your child’s height, weight, and body mass index (BMI) fall on a standard growth chart, any concerns you have, and steps you can take to ensure normal growth and development.

■ **An apple a day:** Focus on your children’s nutritional intake, rather than calories, especially when they are toddlers. Healthful food choices will promote nutritional balance. Eating meals together as a family will help establish healthy eating habits and provide valuable family together time. It’s also a good way to keep portions in check. In addition, discourage your children from “grazing”; for snacks, keep lots of fresh fruits and vegetables on hand.

■ **School days:** Of course, providing nutritional meals at home is easy when compared to monitoring what your children eat during the school day. A few ways to work around this problem include:

1. Most schools regularly send schedules of cafeteria menus home. With this advance information, you can plan on packing lunch on the days when the main course is one

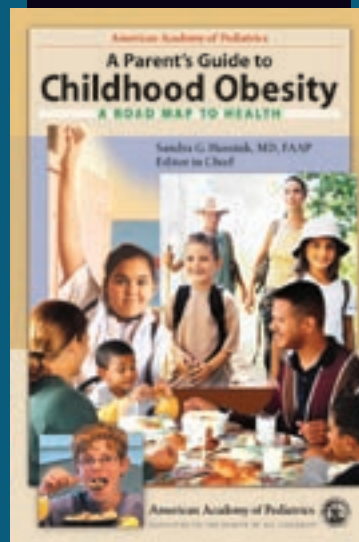
Restrict your child’s soft drink consumption.

■ **TV timeout:** Get away from the TV and computer screens. The AAP recommends that children younger than two not watch television at all; for older children, screen time should be limited to no more than one to two hours a day.

■ **On the move:** Get your children moving around. Anything that involves movement qualifies as physical activity. It doesn’t have to push your child to the point of exhaustion to contribute to weight management. Small, everyday measures can help, such as parking your car away from a store and walking, taking the steps rather than an elevator, and walking the dog.

■ **For the fun of it:** Find fun ways to be physically active inside and outside. Many children enjoy activities sponsored by your community’s parks and recreation department, such as soccer, while some obese children may feel self-conscious about participating in group activities. But there are many individual sports activities, such as horseback riding and martial arts, where they can exercise and have fun. At birthday parties, incorporate physical activities such as miniature golf. Keep in mind, too, that there are sports your children can develop a lifetime love for, such as swimming, walking, tennis, and golf. ●

## Are you worried about your child’s extra weight?



### **A Parent’s Guide to Childhood Obesity** *A Road Map to Health*

By the American Academy of Pediatrics  
Sandra G. Hassink, MD, FAAP,  
Editor in Chief

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