

2008 Report Card on America's Children



The nation's fourth and eighth graders scored higher in reading and math than they did during their last national assessment in 2005, according to the federal government's latest annual statistical report on the well-being of the nation's children.

These and other findings are described in *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2008*. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics compiles the study. It serves as a report card on the status of the country's children.

But not all the report's findings were positive. The United States saw an increase in the adolescent birth rate. The birth rate among girls ages 15 to 17 increased from 21 live births for every 1,000 girls in 2005, to 22 per 1,000 in 2006. This was the first increase in 15 years.

"It is critical that we continue monitoring this trend carefully," says Edward J. Sondik, Ph.D., director of the National Center for Health Statistics in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Teen mothers are less likely to finish high school or graduate from college. Infants born to teen mothers are more likely to be of low birth weight."

This year's report showed an increase in babies born weighing less than 5 pounds 8 ounces. These infants have a higher mortality rate and are at a higher risk for such disabilities as blindness, deafness, and cerebral palsy. This finding reflects a rise in the number of babies born prematurely.

Bad News About Temporary Tattoos

Parents need to think twice before allowing their children to get certain temporary tattoos. Dermatologists are warning consumers that black henna tattoos could contain a harmful chemical known as para-phenylenediamine (PPD). It is believed to cause serious skin rashes. In addition to being used in black hair dyes, PPD makes temporary tattoos last longer.

Despite the fact that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has banned PPD from being applied directly to the skin because of its known health risks, PPD continues to be used in temporary tattoos because the tattoo industry is not regulated. People still getting black henna tattoos are exposing themselves to potentially serious medical problems.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction range from mild eczema to

blistering and even permanent scarring. The first sign of a reaction is typically redness and itching, followed by bumps, swelling, and then blisters.

"Kids make up a significant portion of the population that receives temporary tattoos," says dermatologist Sharon E. Jacob, M.D., FAAD, assistant clinical professor of pediatrics and dermatology at the University of California at San Diego.

Parents mistakenly think they are safe because they are not permanent and are available at family-oriented events. "In fact, nothing could be further from the truth," Dr. Jacob says.

QUICK TIP: Steer your child away from temporary tattoos.

What's Your Parenting Style?

A recent study conducted by scientists at Oklahoma State University

concludes that the way you feed your young children can predict the overall parenting style you will adopt as your kids grow older. This means that successful childhood weight-loss programs must not only address children's eating habits, but also family dynamics. According to scientific literature, only 5 percent of obesity programs for children are effective because they are not designed around specific parenting styles.

In the study, parents of Oklahoma first graders were given surveys about the feeding practices in their homes. The surveys also included questions about parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive.

"Authoritarian parenting is very controlling, but there's no warmth. It's a very bossy and 'do what I say because I say it' parenting style," says Melanie Page, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology. "Permissive parenting is the opposite. Parents set few if any rules so the style is very low on control. Authoritative parents are high in control but also high in warmth so that is a positive general parenting style and usually has the best outcomes for kids."

The finding may be useful to dietitians working to improve childhood obesity intervention programs.

"Food is not a separate issue from parenting in general," Dr. Page says. "If we're trying to affect what or how a family eats, we can't come in and say, 'make your kids eat vegetables.' Working with families on this requires a much broader approach. We have to address the bigger picture of parenting style."

The study was published in the July issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*.



QUICK TIP: One size doesn't fit all when addressing the problem of obesity in children.

Avoiding "the Freshmen 15"

First-year college students face many new experiences.

Learning to eat right and take care of themselves are two important areas that are often overlooked.

"It's way too easy to take the lack of parenting that comes with going to college and become an overgrown child who eats Snickers bars for meals," says Elisabetta Politi, nutrition director at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center.

There's more to freshman weight gain than irresponsible eating. Some freshmen turn into college couch potatoes, some turn to comfort foods because of stress, and some are attracted to junk food when staying up late cramming for tests or finishing papers. Also, campus gatherings offer more opportunities to eat and drink alcohol to excess. That's bad enough from a health standpoint, but alcohol lowers your resistance, including "your resistance to temptation of fatty foods. You tend to eat more when you drink," Politi says.

All those newly acquired bad habits add up quickly. One report says freshmen gain an average of 4.2 pounds during their first 12 weeks on campus. That's almost 11 times more than the weekly weight gain expected in 17 and 18 year olds, and almost 20 times more than the average weight gain of an American adult over the same period.

Politi offers these tips to avoid the typical weight gain during the semester.

- **Make a plan.** Set rules and regulations. Plan how to eat healthy between classes and where to get appropriate foods.
- **Eat breakfast.** In the morning, feed your brain by putting food in

your stomach. Keep it simple by choosing whole grain cereal with milk and a piece of fruit.

- **Stock up on fruits and vegetables.** Keep grapes, small plums, cherries, carrot slices, celery, bananas, apples, and oranges on hand so you have something to grab in a hungry pinch.
- **Watch the beverage calories.** Choose sugar-free drinks, drink lots of water, and add a few glasses of low-fat or fat-free milk to your day.
- **Maintain portion control.** Use the "plate your portion" strategy: Fill half your plate with vegetables and fruits, one-quarter with grains, and one-quarter with lean protein. Don't forget small amounts of healthy fats, which can help curb hunger.
- **Keep a food diary.** Write down what you eat. A recent report found that people who kept food records lost about twice as much weight as those who didn't account for their actions.
- **Exercise.** Join a gym, walk with a buddy, or participate in intramural sports. Whatever activity you pick, aim for at least 30 minutes of activity a day. "It clears the mind and it's great for getting into the right mental place for studying," says Politi.

QUICK TIP: Encourage healthy eating habits and exercise in your college-age child.