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Childhood Obesity

In order to shed pounds, kids need parental support.

by Dawn Weinberger, Contributor



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"He's big boned."

"It's just baby fat."

"We're just waiting for her next growth spurt."

If you've uttered these words about your pudgy offspring, you might be right. Or, you might also be fooling yourself--the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports that childhood obesity is at 18 percent for kids between the ages of 6 and 11, and at 17 percent for those between 12 and 19. In other words, there's a pretty good chance that your chubby child (or a chubby child you know) falls within those frightening statistics. And these kids risk a lot more than excessive playground teasing.

"We are seeing dramatic health consequences from [childhood] obesity," says Jeff Levi, executive director of the [Trust for America's Health](#), a non-partisan health advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C.

What sorts of consequences?

According to Levi, overweight kids are more likely than their healthy counterparts to develop type-two diabetes, high cholesterol and other weight-related health problems.

"Their life expectancy is reduced, and their quality of life will be far worse," he adds.

Unfortunately, the solution isn't necessarily as simple as signing Junior up for fat camp. That's because childhood obesity is generally a byproduct of our culture, says Dr. Susan Bartell, a child health psychologist and author based in New York.

"Over the last 20 years, we have been living in a society that has become sedentary," Bartell says. "Kids are being driven to school, watching too much TV, texting. . . And we are all so busy, and no one has time to just be outside."

Combine this with poor nutrition (kids today are eating way too much convenience food, Bartell says) and you've got a recipe for disaster.

The answer, she says, is parental involvement. This begins by acknowledging that the problem exists, and making the decision to do something about it.

"When kids are overweight, they [usually] don't outgrow it," Bartell adds. "The truth is, unless their parents intervene, they will become overweight adults."

She also points out that the effort to get more exercise and eat a healthier diet really has to be a family affair, even if the child in question is the only overweight family member.

"You want to work on it with your kids," she says.

That's what Jennifer and James Goodman of Dallas, Texas, decided to do when they realized their 10-year-old son, Lucas, had a weight problem. Though his pediatrician had expressed concern for Lucas' health when he was in kindergarten, Jennifer only recently realized the situation was spiraling out of control (at 10, he already weighed in at 130 pounds).

"We are not knowledgeable about nutrition; we didn't know enough about it to put him on a healthy eating plan," Jennifer Goodman says. "We have tried to put him on restrictive diets, but that just made him steal food and become obsessed with it."

Instead, the Goodmans enrolled in a program at the Children's Medical Center in Dallas called LEAN Families (LEAN stands for lifestyle, exercise and nutrition). The 12-week program, ultimately designed to help overweight kids slim down, teaches parents and children about basic nutrition. The program also shows them how to incorporate exercise into daily activities.

"Now Lucas looks at [food] labels, and he knows he needs to keep his snacks around 100 calories," his mother explains.

What if your efforts fail?

Keep trying. As many adults know, it's not easy to keep up a diet and exercise program. It's not easy for children either. And, where your child is concerned, be sure to consult a pediatrician (just in case an undiagnosed health issue is contributing to the weight problem). In extreme obesity cases, some doctors recommend bariatric surgery, also known as adjustable gastric banding, for teens 14 and older.

"This is never the first choice," says Emma Patterson, MD, medical director of Oregon Weight Loss Surgery in Portland. She won't even consider performing surgery on a teen patient who has not tried diet and exercise (with the help of experts) for at least six months. In addition, Patterson explains, a teen surgery candidate must have a body mass index of at least 40, or 35 for those who have already been diagnosed with a life-threatening, weight-related health problem.

Still, other health professionals, like Dr. Bartell, are apprehensive.

"I would be hard pressed to do that kind of surgery on kids," she says. "I would have to be convinced that their physical health was in acute danger before resorting to something that drastic."

One thing everyone can agree on, though, is the fact that when the entire family strives to live a healthy lifestyle, the entire family benefits.

"The fundamental thing," says Levi, "is changing the values within the family and making sure kids

are eating healthier diets." It's a simple formula—even a child could understand it.

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