

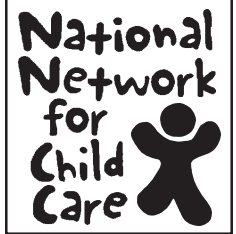


FAMILY CHILD CARE

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CONNECTIONS

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Preventing Childhood Obesity: A Role for Child Care Providers

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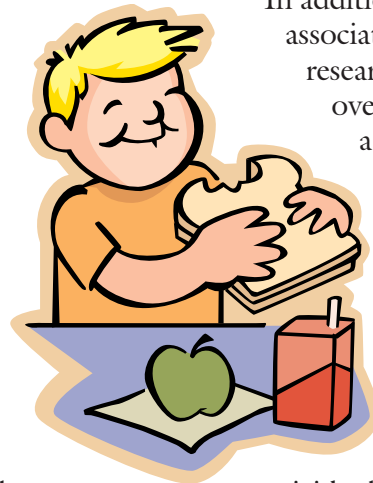
Childhood obesity is one of our nation's most pressing health challenges. According to the 1999–2000 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), 15 percent of children and adolescents 6–19 years old are overweight. This represents a nearly three-fold increase since the 1960s.

In some geographic areas, over 40 percent of children are overweight. And while there are certain groups that appear to be at a greater risk, childhood obesity is a problem that cuts across age, gender, and racial/ethnic lines. Unhealthy weight gain due to poor diet and lack of exercise is thought to be responsible for over 300,000 deaths each year in the U.S., with the annual cost to society estimated at over 100 billion dollars (Office of the Surgeon General, 2003).

Health Consequences Associated with Childhood Obesity

Obesity is associated with a host of negative short- and long-term health consequences, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, certain cancers (e.g., colon, gall bladder, prostate, kidney), breathing difficulties, arthritis, and joint problems (Ritchie et al., 2001).

It is well established in the medical profession that certain problematic heart conditions begin during the childhood years. According to Ritchie et al. (2001), “one out of six overweight children age six and older has been reported to have one or more heart disease risk factors.” Unless children adopt and maintain healthier patterns of eating and exercise, they are also much more likely to become overweight as adults.



In addition to the physical health problems associated with overweight and obesity, researchers have found that being overweight during childhood can also have a damaging impact on children's psychosocial and emotional development (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2001). A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota discovered that overweight adolescents were more likely to be teased, and as a result, were more likely to contemplate and attempt suicide than adolescents who were not teased about their weight (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003). In this same study, teasing about body weight was consistently associated with low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with body size/shape, and high depressive symptoms.

Factors That Contribute to Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is often thought of as a problem that results from simply overeating; however, there are a number of genetic, biological, behavioral, and cultural factors that can influence a child's weight. According to a growing number of researchers, the current obesity epidemic is influenced, in large part, by an environment that promotes excessive food intake and discourages physical activity (French, Story, & Jeffery, 2001). Poor eating habits, such as eating portion sizes that are much too large and frequent consumption of fast food and soft drinks, clearly contribute to childhood overweight and obesity. The problem is compounded by the fact that adults and children have become increasingly sedentary (i.e., physically inactive). For many children, physical activity has given way to excessive television, computer, and videogame use.



Other factors that have been found to possibly contribute to childhood obesity include a family history of obesity, medical illnesses, certain medications (e.g., steroids), stressful life events or changes, family and peer problems, low self-esteem, and depression or other emotional problems (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2001).

Recommendations for Child Care Providers

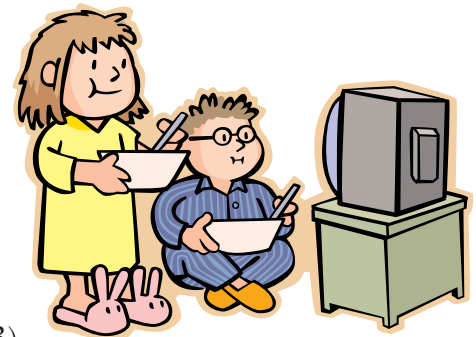
Next to the home environment, schools and child care are the settings where children and youth spend the greatest amount of time. As a child care provider, you cannot be expected to solve the problem of childhood obesity; however, because of your powerful influence in the lives of the children in your care, you can contribute to the solution by playing an important preventative role. Following are some recommendations to assist you in helping children lower their risk for childhood obesity:

- **Provide regular opportunities for children to engage in physical activity.** Regular physical activity is extremely important for the prevention of overweight and obesity. Being physically active also promotes healthy bones and muscles, improves balance and coordination, builds self-esteem, and decreases the risk of developing serious health problems in later years. Experts recommend that all children and youth participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. However, it does not

have to take place all in one block of time. You may want to break the activities up into 15 or 30 minute segments.

Set aside times each day for children to engage in various physical activities. Organize indoor or outdoor activities that enable them to run, jump, walk, climb, and crawl. Make the activities a fun experience for you and the children. When it is too cold or hot outside, think of creative ways to involve children in indoor activities. When the weather is nice, take a trip to the park. There are endless ways to engage children in fun, creative, and physically active games and activities. Just use your imagination!

- **Reduce screen time to two hours or less per day (e.g., television, computer, videos).** Over the last several decades, children have increased the amount of time they spend in sedentary activities, such as television viewing and playing video games. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such activities, they do take away from time that can be spent in physical activities. Researchers have consistently found a strong link between the amount of time children watch television and obesity (Dennison, Erb, & Jenkins, 2002). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children spend no more than two hours of media time per day (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003).



- **Provide nutritious meals and snacks based on the Food Guide Pyramid.** Given the fact that many children spend a good portion of the day in your care, it is likely that you provide two or even three meals a day for them. This means that you have a great opportunity to influence their day-to-day eating habits. It is important to provide children with healthy meals and snacks whenever possible. The USDA Food Guide Pyramids for adults and children (available at www.usda.gov/news/usdakids/food_pyr.html) are an excellent source for guiding the nutritional choices you make during mealtimes. Make sure that you offer children a variety of foods from all of the food groups, and that you provide age-appropriate

portion sizes (see *Connections*, Volume 10, Issue 3 for suggestions).

- Limit consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, including soft drinks.** Sugar-sweetened drinks (e.g., soft drinks, iced tea, lemonade, other fruit-flavored drinks) are one of the leading sources of added sugars in the daily diets of young Americans. Steven Gortmaker, Director of the Prevention Research Center at Harvard University stated, “Children are drinking more sugar-sweetened drinks like soda and fruit punch, which help to promote obesity, instead of milk or water, and this poses a real health risk.” Instead of offering children sugar-sweetened drinks, which are high in calories and low in nutrients, offer healthy alternatives such as water, 100 percent juice and low-fat milk. Even healthy beverages should be consumed in moderate amounts – watch portion sizes so excess calories are not consumed.
- Set a proper example for children by modeling healthy eating habits and regular physical activity.** Like it or not, children view you as a role model. Therefore, it is extremely important for you to model healthy eating and exercise habits. If you want children to eat healthy meals and snacks, they need to see you eating healthy meals and snacks. If you want them to participate fully in physical activities, you need to help them see the importance by participating yourself. Your actions speak louder than your words! Model an enthusiastic attitude toward healthy eating and exercise, and the children in your care will likely follow in your footsteps.
- Discourage children from teasing one another about their size and weight.** Recent studies, such as the one mentioned earlier, point to the fact that children who are overweight often experience teasing by their peers. This should not be allowed. Teasing can be emotionally harmful to children, leading to low self-esteem, depression, and further weight gain. Make it clear to children that teasing is not acceptable in your center or family day home. At the same time, help children feel good about their bodies, even if they are overweight or obese.
- Encourage parents to be engaged in all aspects of their children’s lives.** You may not consider yourself a parent educator; however, you can have a positive impact on parents by encouraging them to be



actively engaged in their children’s nutritional choices and physical fitness patterns. Help parents understand the importance of healthy food choices and regular physical activity. Keep them informed of your efforts to provide a healthy environment for their children while they are in your care. Let the parents know that it is important for them to keep up these positive practices in the home environment. At the same time, be sensitive to the parents’ cultural backgrounds, understanding that in some cultures it is considered a sign of health to be somewhat overweight.

Remember that all adults and children can benefit from healthier food choices and increased physical activity – not just those who are overweight.

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Related Links

The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/default.htm>

Overweight in Children and Adolescents
http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm

Texas Cooperative Extension – Childhood Obesity Prevention in Texas
<http://childobesity.tamu.edu/>

North Carolina Healthy Weight Initiative
<http://www.nchealthyweight.com/gototheplan.htm>

Prevention of Childhood Overweight: What Should Be Done? Position Paper. Center for Weight and Health; University of California, Berkeley
http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh/PDFs/Prev_Child_Oweight_10-28-02.pdf

Center for Weight and Health; University of California, Berkeley. Programs and Materials
<http://nature.berkeley.edu/cwh/resources/educationtoolsint.shtml>

Childhood Obesity - University of Wyoming
<http://www.uwyo.edu/family/HEALTHYC/HEALTH/Childh~2.htm>

Obesity in Children and Teens (Fact Sheet) – American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/79.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/index.htm>

Nutrition and Your Health: Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Joint publication of the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) and Department of Agriculture (USDA)
<http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/>

Prevention of Pediatric Overweight and Obesity Policy Statement – American Academy of Pediatrics
<http://www.aap.org/policy/s100029.html>

USDA Food Guide Pyramids
http://www.usda.gov/news/usdakids/food_pyr.html



Fun Games and Activities that Promote Physical Movement

Involve children in the following activities:

- Fly a kite.
- Jump rope.
- Wash the car/van.
- Dance.
- Climb on playground equipment.
- Play ball!
- Crawl.
- Take a walk.
- Go on a nature hike.
- Run.
- Ride a bicycle/tricycle.
- Do jumping jacks.
- Make and fly paper airplanes.
- Throw a Frisbee.

- Pretend to hop like a bunny, run like a gorilla, or walk like a spider.

Games you can play include:

- Amoeba Tag;
- Capture the Flag;
- Duck, Duck Goose;
- Follow-the-Leader;
- Four Square;
- Freeze Tag;
- Hide-and-Seek;
- Hopscotch;
- Mother-May-I?;
- Red Light/Green Light; and
- Simon Says;



For a list of fun and exciting children's games, including instructions on how to play the above games, go to following website: Games Kids Play (<http://www.gameskidsplay.net/>)

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