Helping Your Child Maintain a Healthy Weight

By Amy Deacon

Pleasantly plump, chubby, chunky? These are all words some of us may use to describe overweight kids. No matter what kind of label you place on it, the truth is clear. Childhood obesity is a major concern and the problem is growing just as fast as the waistlines of American adults. Just like adults, kids are eating more and moving less. When a person takes in more calories than he or she can use, the body holds onto them as excess weight. Most adults understand that excess weight can harm their health. It’s hard to imagine that the same risks apply to the cute, chubby little boy that lives down the street. How can a child be at risk for developing heart disease or high blood pressure? He’s a kid! He’ll slim down eventually, right? Don’t be so sure.

Just as adult obesity has reached epidemic proportions, so have the rates of childhood obesity. The current generation of children has been nicknamed the “supersized” generation. (1) The increased consumption of fast food, soft drinks, and excess calories has contributed to this growing problem. Inactivity doesn’t help the situation. With the amount of time kids spend either playing video games, watching television, and playing on the computer combined with physical education cut-backs in school, it’s no wonder these kids are having trouble maintaining a healthy weight. A combination of these factors as well as genetic, behavioral, and economic factors, and not one single factor, is thought to influence obesity in children. (2)

What’s the Big Deal?

Although teasing and self-image are concerns for overweight children and their parents, the health-related problems associated with obesity during childhood have become a main focus in pediatrics. The prevalence of childhood obesity has doubled within the last 20 years (2) and since obese children are likely to become obese adults, the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight during childhood is crucial. Not long ago, type 2 diabetes was called adult-onset diabetes and was almost unheard of in children. The reality is that many children are now being diagnosed with this disease. Overweight or obese children are at a high risk for developing type 2 diabetes (either during childhood or later in life), cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, cancer, stroke, and osteoarthritis. More and more children are also physically
inactive, with the draw to video games, computers, and television being more appealing than playing outdoors or participating in sports. This is also likely to continue into adulthood, and considering that most adults do not participate in physical activity, intervention is indicated and necessary.

What is the best way to address childhood obesity? Childhood is a critical time for growth and development both physically and psychologically. Children who are have low self-esteem or who are victims of teasing are likely to suffer from physiological stress, which can affect their grades, social interactions, and may carry into adulthood. (3) Self-esteem and a positive body image are important factors to keep in mind when discussing obesity with a child. It is important for the parent not to criticize the child but to encourage and support small gradual changes that positively impact the child’s life. Most experts recommend prevention of additional weight gain rather than a weight loss program for most children.

**Helping Children Maintain a Healthy Weight – Follow the Leader!**

Children learn by example, so one of the best ways to instill the values of proper nutrition and physical activity is to participate yourself. Practicing portion control is one of the best ways to discourage eating more calories than are needed. Allow a child to stop eating when they are no longer hungry so that they can learn the cues their bodies give them when they have had enough. A “clean plate” is not a necessity to ensure that your child has eaten enough of their dinner. Making sure that meals are eaten at scheduled times, at the table is extremely beneficial for encouraging healthy eating patterns. Family meals should not be encouraged while watching television. Meal times can be an important bonding experience for a family.

Planning family activities will encourage exercise and physical activity for parents and children alike. Go for a walk after dinner, go to the park to play on the weekends, go on a bike ride, or just play outdoors in the backyard. Most adults could also benefit from less time in front of the television or computer. Put a time limit on these activities, no more than 2 hours per day on the computer, playing video games, or watching television.

It is also important that children develop a healthy relationship with food. In order to do so, they should learn that all foods, even cookies and cakes, can be incorporated into a healthy diet. There are no “good” or “bad” foods. It is much better to describe foods as foods we eat
all the time, such as fruits and vegetables, and foods that we eat sometimes, like birthday cake and ice cream. It is also very important not to encourage the use of food to provide comfort or use as a reward. Many people carry emotional eating into adulthood, contributing to obesity later in life.

**What’s the Bottom Line?**

Introducing children to good nutrition as early as possible is beneficial to ensure they develop healthy eating patterns they will take with them as they reach adulthood. A parent or guardian’s influence is one of the most important influences in developing a healthy diet. Lead by example. Keep the family active by encouraging physical activity. Chances are your health and waist line will benefit too!

**References not available.**