# Combating childhood obesity

With all the marketing and fun gadgets that encourage kids to stay glued to a screen, with the latest high-fashion junk food right at hand, it's no wonder that childhood obesity has become an epidemic in North America.



As kids continue to grow in size, so do their mental and physical health complications. Studies show that obese children face a greater risk of "adult" health problems like Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and low-self esteem. One study suggests over 70 per cent of overweight adolescents will be overweight or obese as adults.

If your feel that your child is obese or is in danger of becoming obese, consider the following:

**Don't minimize.** Studies show that parents of obese children tend to underestimate their child's weight and describe their children as being "solid" or "big-boned." If a weight problem is never acknowledged, than it's difficult to fix.

**Work with your doctor.** Calculating a child's Body Mass Index (BMI) is more complicated than it is for adults. If you feel your child is overweight or obese, consult their doctor to determine whether your child's weight is on track for their age, height and bone structure. If there is an issue with your child's weight, their doctor can help create a realistic and holistic plan of action.

**Ditch diets.** This may seem counterintuitive, but if diets really worked, then every North American would be at their ideal weight. Diets fail because they're about being "deprived" of "forbidden foods" and usually concentrate on weight loss rather than health. Putting children on a diet can actually create a deprivation-binge battle or yo-yo dieting that can last a lifetime. Banish the word "diet" from your family's vocabulary and stay focused on helping your child make positive food and lifestyle choices.

**Make fitness a family affair.** There's no doubt about it: children mimic what they see. Studies show that kids of physically active parents and siblings are more likely to be active themselves. Rather than finishing off dinner with ice cream, go for a walk. Instead of hibernating indoors during the winter, get outside and build a fort or a snowman. Not only does this encourage your family to stay trim and fit, but it also helps you spend fun, quality time with your kids.

**Stock up on healthy choices.** It's hard to encourage kids to regain control over their eating habits if the pantry is loaded with cookies, chips and other high-calorie, low nutrient foods. Whenever possible, choose nuts and seeds instead of chips, yogurt over ice cream, and fruit over candy.

**Keep it fun.** If your children are bored stiff by baseball, don't force them to be the next Babe Ruth. Instead, let kids take the lead when choosing activities. Many enjoy getting in the game with organized sports like hockey, soccer and basketball. Encourage children who don't take to team sports to explore less competitive activities like cycling, martial arts or hiking.

**Work it in.** If getting out to "exercise" sounds like a turn-off for people in your family, try "sneaking in" physical activities: walk with children to school instead of driving, get bicycles and ride to the store to pick up little things when possible. Both you and your kids will reap the healthy rewards of regular exercise.

Combating childhood obesity isn't an easy task. But by striving to be a healthy role model, encouraging your kids to stay active, and calling on the support of a health care professional if needed, you can help your kids stay fit, well-fed and confident.