Weighing in on childhood obesity

Out-of-control. Crisis. Epidemic. Childhood obesity rates in North America are starting to get noticed. The statistics are staggering: obesity in children has nearly tripled over the last 20 years. And in our increasingly wired, super-sized, over-scheduled and under-active world, it's getting harder for parents to help kids scale back on junk food and the small screen (be it video games, DVDs or the internet) and beef up on whole foods and physical activity.

Though the news seems grim, the information below can help you, your children and your family lighten the load and send childhood obesity packing.

Is my child obese?

In the past, a child was considered as obese if he or she was at or above the 95th percentile average for his or her age. But this system doesn't account for the growing proportion of overweight children who are making defining obesity more complex. The bottom line: **your child's paediatrician can best determine what your child's body mass index (BMI) is and whether or not weight is a concern.**

The Heavy Toll for Obese Children

While the problems for overweight adults are well-known, the negative impact of childhood obesity is just beginning to rear its unhealthy head. From a massive increase in Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and blood pressure as well as bone problems, to early incidents of heart disease, the writing is on the wall: childhood obesity is forcing kids to face 'adult' health problems before they even graduate high school.

Obesity also weighs many kids down emotionally. One study found boys who were obese during both childhood and adolescence were four times more likely to suffer from childhood depression than their slimmer counterparts. Whether the causes are physiological (possibly the chemical effects of inactivity and a poor diet), social (teasing or rejection from other children) or a combination of both remains unclear. Researchers do agree on one thing: childhood obesity significantly increases a youth's chances of developing depression and low self-esteem.

Another upshot of additional physical baggage is emotional baggage. The risk of oppositional defiant disorder—or a hostile, uncooperative behaviour pattern—was 2.5 times greater for obese children. For parents of these children, setting limits is often a constant battle. Causes for the increase create a chicken-egg conundrum. Is the defiant behaviour causing the child to eat and play as they please? Or are overly-stressed parents, reinforcing bad behaviour by offering 'quick fixes' (food, video games, TV, etc.) to calm defiant kids?

The answers are clearly complex and vary from case to case. As a proactive parent, though, there are simple but effective steps you can take to put the brakes on childhood obesity and its hefty harms.

Fighting Flab

The experts have all weighed in and agree: preventing childhood obesity is the best way to stop it. Help kids stay lean by:

Offering healthy options. Learn how to read labels and spot nutritional nightmares (trans fats, high sugar, salt and calorie contents). Short on time and energy? Invest in a cookbook that focuses on fast, healthy meals in 30 minutes. You'll save time and money and your family's waistline. When time doesn't allow for a home-cooked meal, opt for quick health-conscious options instead.

Switching off the TV. Studies suggest that the more TV children watch, the heavier they're likely to be. And while kids aren't moving when they're watching, they are absorbing: cereals with special prizes, artery-clogging fried food, tooth-rotting sweets. Many of today's advertisers are calling out to their most captive audience: children.

Getting them in on the action. Allow kids to assist with meal and family activity planning and preparation. It not only encourages budding chefs and activity co-ordinators to blossom, but also teaches kids to take charge of their own health.

Shaking off stress (literally). A British study found that stressed out kids ate nearly double of what more relaxed children ate. Their stress reliever of choice? High fat junk food. Don't pacify a stressed child with pound cake or potato chips. Instead teach kids to shake it off: whether it's tag, a game of hoops or climbing around in the playground, physical activity keeps kids trim and less stressed.

Setting limits and sticking to them! From the food they eat, to the video games they play, as a parent, you're the gatekeeper. But if you continually set rules and then bend on them, kids will quickly learn how to keep the gate half open. Setting limits only works when parents stick to them 100 per cent of the time.

Separating food and mood. Offering kids cookies to stop crying or dessert to deal with a disappointment teaches children to deal with tough times by eating high fat foods (ever heard of a child being soothed by spinach?). Instead, when times are tough, encourage kids to share their feelings with you, go for a walk, or express their feelings creatively by drawing or writing.

Leading the follower. Actions speak louder than words. Show children the benefits of a healthy lifestyle by living it yourself.

Lighten Up: Hints for Helping a Chubby Child Cope

Your child has been assessed by a doctor and diagnosed as overweight or obese. Now what? Aside from following the preceding **flab fighters**, as a parent it's vital that you:

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.

Create a realistic plan of action that focuses on healthy living rather than weight. If you're not sure where to start, look to your child's doctor or help from a registered dietician for tips on helping your child stay healthy both in body and mind.

Make healthy living a family thing. Instead of creating a special diet for the overweight child, why not create a healthier eating and exercise plan the whole family can be apart of? You'll avoid making your child feel singled out and help your family stay fit to boot!

Keep it light! Child's play should be anything but a drag. Help your kids discover activities they like by exploring lots of different options. If they're uncomfortable with team sports like soccer or volleyball, look to less competitive options like swimming, karate or cycling. While losing weight may be the ultimate goal, having fun should always be the focus.

Healthy eating and activity may sometimes seem like an uphill battle in today's time-crunched culture. But by exercising a little effort, you'll help kids avoid being weighed down by the physical and emotional harms of childhood obesity.