

## HELPING THE OVERWEIGHT CHILD

By Jill West, RD, CDE

School-aged children in the United States are becoming more and more overweight. Statistics show childhood obesity has increased 54% since 1970 in children 6-11 years old. It is estimated that one out of every 3 or 4 children has a significant weight problem before reaching puberty. Although some children may be more genetically prone to obesity, environmental factors are clearly playing a part in this alarming trend.

There are many ways our society and environment are encouraging persistent weight problems. Our lives lack daily activity; schools have decreased playground time and physical education classes; TV, video games and computers have made our lives increasingly sedentary; and advertising of high-fat, high-calorie foods is abundant and enticing.

**Why should we be concerned?** Because 80% of overweight children become overweight adults, overweight kids are at risk for the same health problems as adults, including heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes. They are also more prone to breathing problems, trouble with bones and joints, and accidents. In addition to physical problems, there are the emotional issues, such as rejection, discrimination, and lack of self-esteem affecting their development.

**How can you help the overweight child?** First, the child should be evaluated by his or her doctor to make sure there are not medical problems causing the weight gain. Next most important is a **NO DIET approach!** Children are still growing physically, mentally, and emotionally. Restriction can cause more eating and psychological issues than already exist. Studies have shown that calorie restriction in children decreases attention span and learning, impairs ability to handle stress, and decreases the body's ability to fight off infection.

So what do you do? Foster healthy eating habits and lifestyle changes, while allowing the child to grow into his/her current weight. Thus, it's a "no (or minimal) weight gain" plan.

### The "No Gain" Plan:

#### Plan #1: Keep a Food Log

Write down everything eaten each day for 1-2 weeks. If the child is old enough this can be his primary responsibility. If not, the parent can do the log with the child participating. The log gets facts on paper, allowing parent and child to discuss ideas and solutions, and helps get a plan of action started.

For example, ten days of food records shows Suzie is averaging 1 fruit per day, less than 1 vegetable serving daily and 1 cup milk. Juice and soda totals 3 cups per

day, desserts are eaten 3 times per day: one with lunch, one at afternoon snack, and one after dinner almost daily.

Ask the child what 2 changes she wants to make this week. It is OK to start with the easiest change(s) first. This builds positive momentum.

Suzie and her mom decide they will both plan to get 2 servings of milk and 2 fruits per day for the coming week. Suzie also wants to try decreasing dessert to 2 times per day. She gets to decide when she has them.

Each week sit down and look at the plan. What worked? What didn't work? What obstacles got in the way? What is this week's plan?

Food records can increase awareness of food choices and eating behaviors (i.e. eating because of boredom, while watching TV, or out of habit). A plan to work on a specific *behavior* is another way to begin changing lifestyle and habits.

Ideally, a parent(s) should keep a food log along with the child to support the effort and to learn more about his/her own habits as well. When the parent chooses a specific habit to work on, it reinforces the commitment to family lifestyle changes.

#### Plan #2: Exercise, Exercise, Exercise!

Since 1990 our daily physical activity has decreased 75%, while our intake of fat has increased 31%! As our lives have become more automated, our daily physical efforts have diminished tremendously. One study showed television watching of 2-3 hours per day was associated with increased weight, decreased activity, decreased interest in study and school performance in up to 30% of children aged 3-10 years old. We must consciously add activities of daily living back into our lives. For example, plan daily exercise for you and your kids; ride your bike to the post office; park your car farther away; take the stairs instead of the elevator; or walk at break time instead of sitting.

Activity ideas for the whole family:

- **Turn the TV off!** Set the goal of no more than **30 minutes** TV per day. By decreasing TV time, you free up time for more activity, while allowing for necessary homework time.
- Choose activities your child enjoys or feels good doing.
- Make it continuous motion, such as playing at the park, walking, rollerblading, basketball, soccer, bicycling, or swimming.
- Do chores as activity: washing the car, sweeping, vacuuming, window washing, raking, digging, planting, and weeding.

- Do at least 30 minutes (ideally 60 minutes) 5-7 days per week.
- Do some type of activity daily, even if not 30-60 minutes.
- Most of the activities should include other family members. Everyone should be working at increasing activity.

### Plan #3: Healthy Food Choices

Many nutrients are needed to support the growth of children aged 5 to puberty. Although you cannot control what your child eats at school, you can control what foods you buy, where you eat as a family, what and how meals are prepared, and what foods are available at home. It is very important that the whole family makes changes in food choices, not just the overweight child. Meals should never be prepared separately for the overweight child, nor should certain foods be forbidden for this child while the rest of the family is allowed to eat them.

As a parent, your responsibilities are to decide what healthy foods are available, when meals or snacks are served and where the family will eat. The *child decides what and how much* of the foods provided to eat. Trust your child's ability to recognize his or her own appetite needs. Hunger and good intake will vary considerably from meal-to-meal and day-to-day—you cannot control this. Therefore, it is best to allow the child to determine what, how much, and whether to eat the particular meal or snack.

Since the emphasis is on healthy eating (not restricting portions or weight loss), healthy choices need to be accessible. Most children are lacking in adequate milk sources, fruits, and vegetables. Instead, kids are consuming excessive sodas, juice, meats, and desserts. The Food Pyramid emphasizes foods from the Starch group (cereals, breads, pasta, rice, potatoes) as the largest portions in the diet; next most abundant should be fruits and vegetables; more moderate portions of meat sources and dairy; and little of the fats and sweets.

Take a look at your food log and your child's log. Which foods need to be substituted for healthier, lower fat choices? "Empty" foods include sodas, juice, crackers, chips and desserts. Foods containing too much fat include chips, luncheon meats, (bologna, hot dogs, bacon, sausage), cheese, butter, margarine, mayonnaise, sauces, gravies, seeds, nuts, doughnuts/pastries and most desserts. (For specific, individualized nutrition guidelines for your child, ask his or her doctor to refer you to a Registered Dietitian.)

Suggested changes the whole family can try:

- As a parent, set a good example. Model positive food habits & attitudes.
- Stop preparing fried foods and using cream or cheese sauces.
- Keep fast food meals to no more than once per week for dinner.
- Avoid soda as a daily choice; keep juice to ½cup per day. Look for juices with 100% Vitamin C or Vitamin A.
- Choose nonfat or 1% milk or yogurt daily.
- Choose lowfat protein sources: lean beef or pork, chicken, fish, or beans.

- Eat dessert after dinner less often; however, do not eliminate treats and desserts; do not label foods as "forbidden," making them all the more tempting.
- Check the labels on prepared meals that you buy. Choose meals with less than 30% of the calories from fat.
- Involve all children in shopping, planning and serving meals. When kids are involved in the process, they are more likely to eat what is prepared. It takes the emphasis off the chubby child needing weight reduction and puts the emphasis on everyone being healthy.
- Eat only at the table for meals and snacks; no reading or TV watching while eating.
- When having second portions, encourage vegetables or fruit first.
- Make gradual changes in the foods you eat so it feels less depriving. No foods should be entirely forbidden; instead, set limits on the frequency of high fat, high sugar choices.

### Plan #4: Family Support and Attitudes

Support for the overweight child is extremely important. Studies overwhelmingly show children make significantly greater lifestyle changes and improvement in weight status when parents participate in lifestyle changes, too. Children go by what we *do*, not by what we say. If mom or dad says, "You need to cut down on all those high-calorie snacks you buy after school!" while munching on a candy bar, the child is highly unlikely to make changes himself. If you can't live by the same standards as the child, you can't expect the child to make changes either. The whole family needs to commit to changing habits, not just the chubby one.

In addition, society and the media promote unrealistic expectations of body size, affecting children as young as 8 years old! We must counter these pressures with discussion and praise based on who our children are and what they do, not based on how they look. A child should never be criticized for his or her eating habits, appearance or weight. It must be clear to the child that he/she is loved and approved of regardless of weight, size or appearance. Nagging, teasing, sarcasm and overemphasizing food or fat has been shown to make the weight problem worse. Instead, focus on the quality of food or on specific positive behaviors, not fatness: "I'm glad you chose the fruit---it has lots of vitamins." Or: "Playing kickball was fun! It makes our hearts strong, too."

The overall goal should be to foster healthy self-esteem first and to gradually become healthier physically and nutritionally. In most cases, slimming of the waistline will follow as the healthy habits continue over the long-term.

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Note: National TV Turnoff Week is April 24-30. For more information, call (202)887-0436; visit [www.tvfa.org](http://www.tvfa.org) or write TV-Free America, 1611 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 3A, Washington, DC 20009.

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