



The Family Place Parent Child Center

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Healthy Lifestyle, Healthy Kids



Headlines across the nation proclaim that children in the United States are getting heavier and heavier. The data is staggering—over the past 30 years, the rate of obesity in the US has more than doubled for preschoolers and adolescents, and it has more than tripled for children ages 6 to 11. The increase in overweight children and adolescents is straightforward: an excess of caloric intake compared with caloric expenditure. In other words, an increased number of young people are making unhealthy eating choices and are not getting enough physical activity.

Obesity is excess body fat. Calories are consumed, and if they are not used immediately, they are stored in the manner that the body finds most efficient, in fat cells called “adipose tissue.” In general, a diet high in fat, low in “complex carbohydrates” (whole grains and cereals, fruits and vegetables), and a sedentary lifestyle are all associated with the build up of body fat. There are a number of different ways to measure the amount of body fat in a child. Body fat is often evaluated by plotting on a graph the weight of the child for its height and age, or by calculating the Body Mass Index (BMI), which is a more complex weight-height ratio. If a child shows a potential for obesity based on these measurements, it may be worthwhile for other types of evaluation to be done. A physician is the best source of information about body fat measurements and how to understand them.

Because obese children may get a head start on health problems associated with weight in adulthood, such as some forms of diabetes and heart disease, it is important to incorporate an effective weight-loss treatment early on for a child diagnosed as obese. Parents with an obese child should follow the guidelines of their physician or nutritionist. In addition, it is helpful for all children to have parents

who work on establishing good eating and activity patterns in their day-to-day lives.

Parents Have Control

Parents are the ones who buy food, cook the food and decide when and where the food is eaten. Even small changes can have a big difference in your family’s overall health. Parents have the ability to understand diet, proper nutrition and portion control to help curb youth obesity. Good habits start from an early age and it is important that every influence on a young child’s nutritional choices will reinforce healthy habits. Here are some ideas for ways to avoid the lifestyle habits of making poor food choices and becoming too sedentary.

- **Provide a good diet.** Try to use the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) food guide pyramid for guidance. The shape and the position of the food groups represent what a balanced diet should look like. The majority of food should come from the base of the pyramid (the grains, vegetable, and fruit groups), some from the middle (the dairy, meat and other protein groups), and few from the pyramid’s tip, which are the foods with many calories, but little nutrients.

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- **Be a good role model.** Children tend to pick up the habits of their parents. That means adults need to evaluate their eating habits and make sure that they are setting a good nutritional example for their young children. This doesn't mean we have to ban all the fun foods we love! Teach your children moderation, not restriction. If children watch parents make healthy choices, chances are they will as well.
- **Use proper portion size.** A portion size for a toddler is about a quarter of the serving for an adult. Typical serving sizes are 1 to 2 tablespoons of vegetables and about half an ounce of meat, depending on child's appetite. Although these servings may seem modest, it's better to start small and give seconds. Too big portions can be overwhelming and take away a child's appetite. Starting small allows a greater chance for success, with more opportunity for praise.
- **Plan ahead.** In addition to three well-balanced meals, keep fun and healthy snacks with you! Hunger often promotes bad food choices. Prepare snack bags with whole-grain crackers, carrots, sliced fruit or your child's favorite nutritious snacks before you leave the house. Teach children the value of small meals and healthy snacks.
- **Make food adventurous and creative.** It is important to open up your child's nutritional choices by offering them variety in the foods they eat. A great way to introduce new foods in to allow them to pick which foods they want to try. At the grocery store, choose three new foods you would like your child to try and let them pick which of the three they want. Have them join you in preparing the new food, allowing them to become a part of the activity.
- **Get Moving.** Proper nutritional habits are one part of the puzzle. If kids are not active they will still be missing an essential element to good health. Today, children are inundated with television, video games, computers and many more toys that involve sitting for hours on end. Help motivate your children to get outside and play by getting into an activity with them. Step out into the yard and play catch, freeze-tag, a game of basketball or just take a walk with them. Dance in the living room instead of watching television. When they become involved in games or activities, fitness is not something they dread, but a fun part of their day.



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