



Childhood obesity: Parenting advice

Obese children are often shunned both by peers and adults, so it's extremely important for you to treat your obese child as an equal to other children. You play a crucial role in helping your child feel normal, control weight and develop healthy habits to stay fit for life.

Take advantage of every opportunity to help your child build a positive self-image. Heavy children are at increased risk of low self-image because of the social emphasis on appearance and being slim.

Here are some other tips to help your obese child — and yourself:

Be a positive role model. "Parents play a vital role in the development of their children," says Philip Fischer, MD, a paediatrician at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, USA. *"Take notice of lifestyle habits that can contribute to overeating and inactivity in your children — then set a good example."*

You can make subtle lifestyle changes to help your kids eat healthier. Limit portion sizes. Make an effort to cook with less fat — for example, bake foods instead of frying them. Don't order French fries if you don't want your kids ordering French fries. Don't buy chocolate-filled cookies if you don't want your kids sneaking a few of them from the magic cupboard. Likewise, your child will be more willing to snack on fruits and vegetables after seeing you doing the same.

Get active. Try to plan activities that get the whole family moving, such as skating, hiking or biking. Make an after-dinner walk a regular part of your family's evening. Remember that exercise doesn't have to be hard work. Gardening, running through the sprinkler, shovelling snow and cleaning the garage are all good options.

Make eating an activity in itself. Eating is a significant event, and it should be enjoyable. Kids, especially overweight kids, shouldn't eat while watching TV, riding in a car or walking through the kitchen. They should sit down just to eat, enjoy the meal and then get up and do something else fun.

A good way to accomplish this goal: reinvigorate the family dinner. Setting aside time to eat together at the table will help you monitor your child's food intake and will give you some quality time together. Get the kids involved in the menu choices, meal preparations and clean up, too.

Try not to love with food. Instead of rewarding your children with snacks, teach them to use food for energy. Rather than treating your child to an ice-cream cone for a good grade, choose an alternative way of celebrating. Spend some quality time with your child — take a walk, go to the bowling alley, play a game of cards or go on a long bike ride together.

Watch what your kids drink, too. Drinks with calories provide lots of sugar with little health benefit. Limit fruit juice to 4 to 6 ounces daily for children ages 1 through 6, and less than 12 ounces every day for older children. Although juice is "natural" and considered healthy, too much juice — including sweet fruit drinks that are fortified with vitamins and minerals — can be a major source of excess calories in children's diets.



Be wary of diet soda, as well. Diet soda doesn't have calories or sugar, but it also doesn't have any nutritional value. It's important to remember that juices and sodas may take the place of other nourishing beverages like milk, which is a major source of calcium needed for growing bones.

Don't be too restrictive. Sweets and fast foods don't have to be completely eliminated. They should just make up a very small part of your child's overall diet. Also, don't put your child on a diet unless recommended by your child's doctor or you consult with him first — too few calories can interfere with proper growth.

Limit television, video and computer time. There's a clear link between television time — especially when combined with eating — and obesity.

Focus on positive goals. Overweight children should focus on achieving goals they want to achieve. They may set their sights on running laps with, instead of behind, the class, or being able to bike for more than 20 minutes without getting tired. It's much better to choose these kinds of positive goals than to focus on more negative-sounding goals, like losing weight.

Take small steps as a family. Make sure changes are subtle and involve the whole family. It's better to substitute fruit in place of dessert than to omit dessert altogether. That way your child won't feel like there has been a revolution. Other examples of subtle changes you can make include parking your car a little farther away, not picking up fast food as often and taking a family walk in the evenings.

CAREFUL, COMMUNICATION IS CRUCIAL

Most overweight kids are fully aware of their weight. They have likely faced taunts and name-calling at school long before you thought to intervene. So don't be afraid to bring up the topic of health and fitness, but do be sensitive that your child may interpret your concern as an insult.

Talk to your kids directly, openly and without judgment, see what they think and help them set positive goals and work with them to meet those goals.

By modelling healthy-living habits, staying positive and — above all — letting your children know that they're loved no matter what, you'll find it's much easier to help your child lose weight without damaging his or her self-esteem.