



# Childhood Obesity: Healthy Habits for the Entire Family

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February 2010

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 25 percent of all children between the ages of 2 and 18 are overweight. Of this number, approximately 9 million children over the age of 6 are obese. What is even more troubling is that among obese children 60 percent have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease such as elevated cholesterol. Subsequently, the number of children with type 2 diabetes continues to increase each year. It is a daunting problem, but we do have some choices and very important allies in this fight--YOU! You, your child and your health care provider are a team in this battle. Together we can be victorious.

But there are some misconceptions that we need to address. First, this is not just "your" problem but society's as well. From fast food restaurants to school cafeterias, healthier and smaller sized portions need to be considered and made available. Second, despite what magazines report, there are no quick fixes. This battle requires an entire lifestyle change for you and for your family. Remember, your child will be more successful if you are actively involved as a family! Third, hormones are often blamed for obesity but in reality hormones only account for less than 1 percent of obesity in children. What is responsible are supersized food portions along with poor food choices and a sedentary lifestyle.

Healthy eating habits begin in infancy and childhood. As a parent you have an enormous influence on your child's eating behavior. Parents are the first role models for their children. As children become adolescents, parental influence tends to diminish. Hopefully though, healthy habits have been ingrained long before the teenage years. Healthy food choices, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and lean meats are the cornerstones of any healthy diet. Snacks such as fruit, baked chips, sugar-free cereal and frozen juice bars can be healthful and fun to eat. Simply substituting water for a single can of soda can eliminate 150 calories a day. This means that a child who consumes 3 cans of soda a day has taken in 450 empty calories which is equal to 30 teaspoons of sugar! In our hectic and busy lives we often turn to fast food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But instead of

a double cheeseburger with fries and a soda, substitute a child's hamburger with fruit slices and skim milk. Instead of a sausage breakfast croissant, substitute an egg sandwich on an English muffin or better yet, yogurt with fruit.

Perhaps the most important thing you can encourage besides a healthy diet is to get moving as a family. One study concluded that 75 percent of children in 4<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade do not get the recommended amount of exercise each day. It does not just mean participation in team sports. As a family you can walk, dance, swim, bowl, and work out at the Y--the options are infinite! Do not expect schools to be responsible for your child's physical activity. Many physical education programs are the first to be eliminated with budget cuts. Many states no longer mandate physical education programs and they are often offered either twice weekly or not at all. We need to make family exercise time mandatory!

The American Academy of Pediatrics is recommending the "5210 Plan". This means five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily; no more than two hours of screen time daily; engage in at least one hour of activity daily; and consume zero sugared beverages. Again it is important to note that these healthy eating habits and lifestyle must be developed with the support of the entire family. Everyone should be part of the plan or the overweight child will feel isolated and resentful, thereby increasing his or her risk of failure. Change is difficult and will not be achieved immediately. But with slow and steady incremental changes, a healthier lifestyle can be achieved.

Please speak to one of our Esse providers if you are interested in starting a new and healthier lifestyle in 2010.

#### Recommended Resources:

1. [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) "Eat This Not That! For Kids! Be the Leanest, Fittest Family on the Block!"
2. [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
3. [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)

[www.essehealth.com](http://www.essehealth.com)