

Parents Take Charge: The Obesity Epidemic Physical Activity For Overweight or Sedentary Children

There are three factors to consider when encouraging change in your child's lifestyle: activity, diet and lifelong wellness. The first article of our three month "Parents Take Charge" series is about increasing activity level. Next month, we will tackle the subject of diet. In the third month, we will give you tools that will help you and your family continue a life of wellness. Let's begin!

A new American Demographics analysis of World Health Organization records indicates that the United States leads the world with a population that is 74.1% overweight or obese, as compared to a 34.5% global average. Very soon, obesity will surpass smoking as the number one cause of preventable death in America. This epidemic is no longer just a problem for adults – childhood obesity is steadily on the rise, too.

According to recent research, about 20% of American children are now overweight. If not treated, childhood obesity can lead to coronary heart disease, stroke, high cholesterol and triglycerides, hypertension, diabetes, respiratory problems, osteoarthritis, musculoskeletal disorders, cancer, gallbladder disease, sleep apnea, body image disorders, eating disorders and possibly Alzheimer's disease. If your child leads a sedentary lifestyle or is overweight, it is time to take action now. As parents, you must take charge of your children's health like you would their safety. The alternative may be grave.

Although genetics, metabolism, culture and behavior play a role in determining body size, obesity is primarily a direct result of consuming more calories than you burn over time. Therefore, the focus with sedentary or overweight children should be to encourage more calories burned through physical activity, and less calories consumed through food. Remember that your child's eating and activity patterns have developed slowly, over the course of years. Consequently, it will take time for your child to adapt to the new lifestyle changes that are necessary to prevent weight gain or lose weight. The changes you make and encourage in your child's lifestyle should be consistent, yet gradual enough to reduce physical and emotional discomfort. Most likely, your child does not understand the looming health hazards of being inactive and overweight in the same way that you do. Take charge, educate yourself and then educate your children through action.

Start activity now.

Exercise is the surest way to burn calories and keep off unwanted weight. It increases metabolic rate by increasing lean muscle mass, thereby setting your child up for success in the long term. Exercise is also proven to enhance many of our bodily functions, both physiologically and psychologically. It strengthens bones, muscles and joints as well as the heart and lungs. It reduces depression, enhances self esteem and builds confidence. Through proper goal setting, activity selection and rewards your child can start enjoying the benefits from an active lifestyle immediately.

1. Goal Setting

Setting goals and tracking progress helps everyone, including children, stick to a healthy program. As a parent, you need to set goals realistically, and with enthusiasm. Make increasing activity a family priority and be a role model for your children. Children should be getting at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day. This may sound challenging but remember that most children's play is a vigorous form of activity itself. Encouraging outdoor play several times per week will get your children at least part way to their goal. Limit television, computer time and video games to 1-2 hours a day, or have them exercise during a program.

One way to set goals with your children is for the two of you together to write down specifically what they want to achieve for the week or month in terms of increasing activity. For example: take the dog for a 10 minute walk everyday, dance for 20 minutes 3 times each week, ride a bike to school, start a paper route, play basketball 2 times this week, do 5 minutes of jumping jacks everyday, jump off the diving board 50 times in a row, or jog in place during commercials. The goals you choose together should be realistic for their age, interests and fitness level. Start small to ensure success

immediately, and build bigger goals as your child gets fitter and more excited about exercise. You may want to have your child track and journal progress in order to help them stay on track, recognize successes and see how far they have come. You can do this on paper and post it somewhere visible in the home, or track it on-line. Visit www.justmove.org for a fun on-line tracking system.

2. Find activities that your child enjoys.

Keep in mind that children do not generally have the tolerance for the same type of exercise that adults participate in, such as personal training, cardiovascular machines or long bouts of weight training. They respond and stay interested in activities that are social, interactive and entertaining. Enjoying their exercise will increase adherence. The options for increasing activity for your child are endless. As a family, you could join a wellness center (usually affiliated with a hospital), YMCA or commercial fitness center. Buy a treadmill, indoor trampoline or exercise videos. Hike, walk, bike, swim, dance, play. Get them involved in any type of physical sport such as tennis, soccer, racquetball, softball or golf. You can encourage them to lift weights, which has been proved to be safe for all ages, given proper instruction. Introduce them to martial arts, yoga or Pilates through classes or videos. You could even consider getting them involved in learning something out of the ordinary and entertaining, such as mastering a unicycle or pogo stick. Physical work around the house is great exercise, too. Have your child help with vigorous chores inside the house or do yard work outside. The bottom line with exercise is that you must find activities your child enjoys (or at least can tolerate) and make sure they stay active. Consider making activity a family priority. Mix it up and make it fun.

3. Rewards

Especially when your child first starts increasing physical activity, rewards are a great way to encourage them to keep up the healthy habits, and make them feel good about themselves. Make a point to reward and recognize all accomplishments, big or small. Consistent verbal praise is important throughout the process of change. Remember to tell them frequently how proud you are of the changes they are making. In addition, physical rewards can provide extra incentive. The best way to determine a reward system is to have your kids participate in the decision making process about what the rewards will be (within reason). You would of course want to encourage healthy rewards, such as going to see a movie, having a sleep over, or allowing them to participate in their favorite non active hobby more often. You could give small, inexpensive prizes or buy something they want after longer term goals are met.

The following links are full of information that you may find helpful as you and your child embark upon the road to a happier, healthier future.

[Six Dimensions](#)

[United States Department of Health and Human Services](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#)

[Youth Media Campaign](#)

About the author:

The author of this article is Kiersten K. Mooney. Kiersten has a degree in Sociology, Exercise Sports Science and Sports Medicine from the University of Miami. She also attended many graduate courses in Exercise Physiology and Nutrition. As a graduate she has done extensive research in the field of sports specific training and has been published. She is a certified personal trainer, aerobics instructor and yoga instructor. Currently, she is studying eating disorders and the growing epidemic of obesity in the United States, with a focus on childhood obesity.