

EASY ANSWERS, HARD SOLUTIONS: OBESITY AND YOUR KIDS

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It's on television, in magazines, and on the agenda of your local school board meetings. The subject of all this concern is in your cupboards, on the dinner table, and probably on the back seat of your car. "It" is food, particularly snacks and fast foods that are contributing to an obesity epidemic among American children.

The fat that plagues most of us grownups is weighing down our children, as well. And, a lifetime of obesity is much worse than gaining a few pounds as an adult. Lifetime fat contributes to serious health problems, from diabetes to a shorter life span.



None of us want to be responsible for making our children sick or compromised in any way. So the big questions are, "What can a parent do?" and "How can I possibly do that?"

The answer to the first question isn't that complicated, but it is hard to implement. You have to make sure your children eat fewer sugar or fat laden foods and get them outdoors for a lot more exercise.

I know it is really hard to make the best choices on food when you and your children are inundated with thousands of commercials to buy and try their

products. The majority of commercials aimed at kids are for food, not toys or games. As reported in a recent Wall Street Journal Article¹, over 405 new fast food products were launched in 2004 with the word, "go", in the name or in the advertising campaign. We are a nation eating on the fly.

Most parents are trying to raise their children, work at a job, and take care of their home. How much of anyone's energy or brainpower is left over for housework or meal preparation?

Let's go back to the solution and break it down into steps:

1. **Getting started:** If you have an infant, nurse for as long as you can, dilute full-strength fruit juice, and restrict heaping servings of sweet fruits when you begin to introduce solid foods. It is natural to like sweet tastes, but too much of it discourages finding pleasure in savory and "green" flavors. Nursing babies are less likely to get overfed, have a lower caloric intake than bottle fed babies, and self-regulate their food intake. They quit eating when they are full.

¹ Sarah Ellison. *Life on the Go Means Eating on the Run, and a Lot of Spilling*, Wall Street Journal, June 7, 2005.



2. **Once a day:** Even the nation's leading producer of fast food can't compose a menu with calorie laden snacks on it! The Frito-Lay website (www.fritolay.com), for instance, has meal plans for 1500, 2000, and 3000 calories a day (like anyone one of us grown-ups should even dream about 3000 calories a day!).

Guess what? *There is only one snack a day - and that snack is a meager one ounce of baked Frito-Lay chips or pretzels.* If the largest purveyor of snack foods in America is telling you that a one-ounce allowance for baked chips is the most you can consume for a day, your children should be consuming less.

3. **Once a week:** If you need to roll back the clock on your children who have gotten attached to fast foods, take another big step. Lower your children's allowance for a fast food to one small portion of a low fat or low sugar snack each day. Then permit one fast food meal a week - on your watch. Hold firm on this, because your kids will find ways to get more junk; at school, from friends' houses, or even from Grandma. So, as hard as it may seem for you, hold the line at home.



4. **Fresh and fast:** Apples, oranges, pears, and grapes will keep a week. So will bananas if you buy them green. Carrots, celery, and even broccoli with low fat ranch dressing are easy snacks. Berries can be managed with a paper cup and no utensils. If you have three kids, at two pieces of fruit a day times seven days a week, you need 42 pieces of fruit. One whole apple has got to be better for them than 10 potato chips, and it's just as easy to reach for the piece of fruit as it is to reach for a sampling of chips.
5. **Simple and consistent:** Very few kids come here with sophisticated taste buds. Most are content to eat simply and repetitively. Even picky eaters are children who like a limited number of foods. So stop obsessing over variety, and get practical with real nutrition. If you eat meat, bake a lot of chicken on one day; cook up a few pounds of lean ground meat on another. Cooked or raw vegetables and a small amount of bread, potatoes, rice, or pasta complete the meal. From this foundation you can have six decent meals ready in less than 30 minutes each day, with your fast food treat on the seventh day. And remember, bake, broil, steam. And sit down to eat without the television.
6. **Set an example:** Overall, it's better to demonstrate a healthy lifestyle and set the tone for children to emulate than to nag or criticize a child for something he or she really can't control. This is a positive approach to prevention and intervention. Overweight children are likely to have at least one overweight parent. So when a child is obese, the role model is often right within the family.

Very few people can lose weight without support, so if at all possible, make weight loss a parent-child project. Medical supervision and emotional support are very important to success. And if your child is seriously obese, there is definitely a need for more



knowledge about portion size, and how much of what foods will comprise a healthy diet. You can join a reputable weight loss program for yourself and teach your child what you've learned. Medical supervision is essential for monitoring a child's weight loss program, but the two of you can still work together.

7. **Go outside and PLAY!** The biggest deterrent to obesity is exercise. For a culture on the run, we actually don't move our bodies very much at all. Make sure your child's school has physical education *every day*. Create a family ritual of doing at least one physical activity on the weekend - a bike ride, the soccer league, a day at the park. Walk around the block. As strange as it sounds, play just doesn't happen. You have to make it happen. Time spent playing fights obesity, is great quality time together, and creates cherished memories for yourself and your kids.

