



Illustration By Jana Christy

Weigh to Go!

Fighting Childhood Obesity

By Abeba Tzeggai

More children are obese today than ever before. Within the last 30 years, the rate of obesity in the United States has more than doubled for preschoolers and adolescents, and tripled for children ages 6 to 11. The reasons for a child's obesity are complex; the results are devastating. The most common factors (together with a combination of genetics and health issues) are too little exercise, too much screen time (television, computers and video games) and too much junk food.

Overweight and obesity result from an energy imbalance, meaning eating too many calories and not getting enough physical activity to expend them. With excess weight come physical, social and mental health problems. Children who are

overweight are at greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, poor self-esteem and stigmatization by peers.

Why do children need daily exercise? Regular exercise not only builds strong bones and muscles, but it also helps children sleep well at night and stay alert during the day. Later, when children are experiencing raging hormones, rapid growth and social pressures, which may lead to overeating, it is the active children who become healthy, fit adults.

Parents and caretakers have a profound influence on children by promoting certain values and attitudes, rewarding or reinforcing specific behaviors and serving as role models. Parents can set a good example for their children by modeling healthful eating behaviors and being physically active. Poor eating and exercise patterns are often

established during childhood.

One way to increase your children's activity levels is to limit time spent watching TV, playing video and computer games and talking on the telephone. A good practice is to insist that your children take a five-minute activity break every 30 minutes while watching TV, working on the computer and doing homework.

If you want an active child, be active yourself. Increase weekend physical activity by jumping rope, rollerblading and playing yard games. Take the stairs instead of the elevator or park the car farther away from stores. Exercising together gives you good family time, so find fun activities that the whole family can do together, such as swimming, hiking, cycling, canoeing and walking the dog.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 55

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

The key is to get kids moving. Free-play activities, such as tag, hide-and-seek, hopscotch or jump rope, are great for burning calories and improving fitness. Participate with, and encourage, your children in school fitness events, such as fun-runs, skating parties and field days.

Create a physical activity center with safe, indoor active toys and games in the corner of the family room. Play basketball with your

the Food Guide Pyramid (available at www.mypyramid.gov) as a guide in planning menus for your family. Eat meals seated at a table away from distractions. Make this a time to share news and tell stories. Try to have one family meal together every day.

Choose breastfeeding exclusively for the first four to six months of life. Research suggests breastfed infants may be less likely to become over-

children that it's okay to leave food on their plates.

During your child's physical exams, ask the doctor to show you growth curves that include percentiles for height, weight and body mass index (BMI). These allow you to compare your child with the norms for age and sex, but do remember that these charts are only guides and that there are many variations.

Parents and caretakers can be effective advocates by becoming involved in efforts in their neighborhoods, schools and communities to improve neighborhood safety as well as to expand the access and availability of opportu-

nities for physical activity and healthful eating, such as recreational facilities, playgrounds, sidewalks, bike paths and farmers' markets. Parents can lobby for more healthy options in vending machines and school lunches.

Many families feel they don't have the time it takes to prepare healthier meals and get more exercise. Shopping, cooking, sharing a meal and cleaning up do take longer than zipping into the drive-through lane at a fast-food restaurant. But the dangers of childhood obesity are real and they are taking a toll. Helping to set your kids on the path to a healthy future is one of the most important things you can do for them.

Abeba Tzeggai is the Administrator of the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program, a Registered Dietician and a Nutritionist with Fairfax County's Office for Children. If you are a permitted or state licensed family child care provider and want to know more about the USDA Food Program, call the Office for Children at 703-324-8100.



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children after dinner or take a family walk. Let your children try a variety of activities, such as sports, dance, martial arts or swimming through safe and encouraging programs. Encourage them to make new friends with other active kids. Also, let your children safely climb, run and jump to help develop muscle strength and bone density.

Healthy Eating

As role models, parents and caretakers provide nutrition education for their children. Parental food likes and dislikes greatly influence children's eating. Promote healthful food selections by making nutritious foods available at home and by encouraging family meal times. Studies show that the more families eat together, the more likely it will be that older children and adolescents will consume fruits, vegetables, grains and calcium-rich foods. Use

weight when they grow older.

Parents or caretakers are the primary gatekeepers for selecting and preparing food at home. Involve children in grocery shopping and in reading labels. Select recipes and cooking methods that are lower in fat. For example, prepare baked chicken instead of fried, use fat-free salad dressings, eat more steamed or raw vegetables and serve small portions.

Include assorted colors, textures and shapes of food to attract young children and to encourage acceptance. Serve children an appropriate portion size. Children will eat more if you serve them more. By the age of 5, young children seem naturally able to choose appropriate portion sizes and eat only until they are no longer hungry. But peer and parental pressures often encourage children to eat more than necessary and dismiss satiety cues, so tell your

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