

Children Learn what They Live

by Linda Fiverson



Looking around the room at any given place, on any given day, you are bound to see more overweight people than ever before. You see this in restaurants and workplaces, at theatres and supermarkets, in classrooms and even on the playground. This should alarm us! Research says that approximately 19 percent of children are overweight and approximately 17 percent of adolescents (teenagers 12-19). These numbers are higher than they've ever been.

While fashion magazines for women and teens flash slender bodies and quick diet and exercising tips, there is an ever-growing sub culture of individuals who are more highly attracted by the lure of food and food advertisements. Young children are not exempt from the appeal. They see all the commercials and ads and quickly learn to *read* by recognizing the logos of all their favorite fattening and fast food venues.

“WHAT is going on?” we might ask but there isn't a readily available answer. More than likely, this upsurge in weight can be attributed to numerous factors. It is important to look at all of them so that we can make effective changes.

Research links both heredity and environment to overweight and obesity. Other factors include easy access to and overindulgence of foods with little nutritional value and not enough healthy ones, spending too much time watching television and playing video games and too little time involved in physical activities. Fast food options are more varied than ever before and seem to be popping up wherever we look. In a society where more households have two working parents than ever before, time is at a premium. We are eager to feed our kids and “get on with it”... Sometimes we don't even take the time to think about what we're really feeding them. That should be the first step in an action plan— to re-think what we eat and give our children to eat.

We are our children's gatekeepers. It is our job to take care of them and teach them how to best take care of themselves. Even the youngest children can begin learning what is healthy! Our jobs would certainly be easier if food makers would help us. Unfortunately, they are more interested in making money and have wisely designed foods and packaging to catch our children's attention. As we walk down the supermarket aisles, our kids quickly recognize their favorite cartoon characters smiling at them from cereal boxes, pop tarts and cookies. Not only are the foods colorful and sugar-laden but many offer free prizes, puzzles and contests. How can we even ask our children to resist these treats and deprive them? It might be hard to admit but there are those of us who do think like this. Look at all the promotions offered by fast food establishments. Not only do they have free giveaways, they have them in series and collections. Our kids want them all and why not? We would too! Of course, that doesn't mean they have to have them but it does make our job as parents and caregivers harder. Hopefully, we will be come stronger and wiser as we seek to better educate ourselves about what is good for our children's bodies and minds.

Being overweight is not easy for adults. It is even harder for children as some of us probably know. They are often rejected and made fun of and find it difficult to make friends and date. They have trouble wearing the same fashionable clothes as their peers and are reluctant to participate in gym class and after school sports. It is no surprise that these same children also suffer psychologically and socially as they are stigmatized and sometimes ostracized. They don't feel as good as their classmates either. They are more tired and sluggish, have decreased energy and ambition and sometimes have an overall feeling of "malaise". On top of all this, the incidence of children and adolescents with high blood pressure, asthma, diabetes, high cholesterol and joint problems has risen in direct proportion to the increase of overweight and obesity. This alone should scare us into action...

We've all heard the expression, "Do as I say, not as I do." We sometimes use it in jest but we need to take it seriously. We are role models for our children and they watch us intently. If we want them to develop good, healthful eating habits and partake of exercise, we must do these things ourselves. We must be good examples!

By changing the eating habits of our entire family, we put emphasis on what really is the most important element – healthful eating. We should never focus on numbers and our children's weight. Though it may be tempting, I discourage using food as an incentive, reward or punishment. Food is for nourishment and should be eaten when we are hungry. I suggest putting a limit on the amount of time children spend in front of the T.V. and computer and encouraging them to increase their activity levels instead. This usually becomes more difficult to do as children get older but it's very important and should not be overlooked! Children need to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables and to drink water instead of soda and fruit juice.

It is said that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. As children get older, many start skipping this meal and they go to school on an *empty* stomach. They are careless about what they eat when they become hungry and just grab anything available. Many schools have now developed wellness policies and are more conscious than in the past about what they are serving in their buildings. This is a wonderful thing because it means there are now more nutritious food and beverage choices in their vending machines. School awareness should also make it "safe" for children and teens to buy lunch if they aren't "brown-bagging" it but it's never a bad idea for parents to double check!

We are our children's first teachers and it's our responsibility to care for them. We need to be proactive and teach them well... After all "Children learn what they live" and we want them to be healthy and productive!

Linda Fiveson is a Nutritionist in Syosset, N.Y. In addition to counseling she sells her own line of foods which are all free of flour, gluten, sugar and preservatives. For more information call (516) 496-2300. Go to Newsday.com to see Linda's interview 1/1/08.