

## Overweight Children: Parenting Advice

You play a crucial role in helping your child feel normal, control weight and develop healthy habits to stay fit for life. Take advantage of every opportunity to help your child build a positive self-image. Heavy children are at increased risk of low self-image because of the social emphasis on appearance and being slim.

Here are some other tips to help your overweight child and you:

- **Be a positive role model.** The habits of parents are the best predictor of what habits their children will develop. You can make subtle lifestyle changes to help your kids eat healthier. Limit portion sizes. Make an effort to cook with less fat — for example, bake foods instead of frying them. Don't order French fries if you don't want your kids ordering French fries. Don't buy chocolate cookies with double-stuffed crème if you don't want your kids sneaking a few of them from the cookie jar. Likewise, your child will be more willing to snack on fruits and vegetables after seeing you doing the same.
- **Be active.** Try to plan activities that get the whole family moving, such as skating, hiking or biking. Make an after-dinner walk a regular part of your family's evening. Remember that exercise doesn't have to be hard work. Gardening, running through the sprinkler, shoveling snow and cleaning the garage are all good options.
- **Make eating an activity in itself.** Try not to eat while watching TV or other activities. Try to sit down to eat and enjoy the meal, then get up and do something else. A good way to accomplish this goal is to reinvigorate the family dinner. Setting aside time to eat together at the table will help you monitor your child's food intake and will give you some quality time together. Get the kids involved in the menu choices, meal preparations and clean up, too.
- **Try not to love with food.** Instead of rewarding children with snacks, teach them to use food for energy. Rather than treating your child to an ice-cream cone for a good grade, choose an alternative way of celebrating. Spend some quality time with your child — take a walk, go to the bowling alley, play a game of cards or go on a long bike ride together.
- **Watch what your kids drink, too.** Drinks with sugar provide lots of calories with little health benefit. Limit fruit juice to 4 to 6 ounces daily for children ages 1 through 6 and less than 12 ounces every day for older children. Although juice is "natural" and considered healthy, too much juice — including sweet fruit drinks that are fortified with vitamins and minerals — can be a major source of excess calories in children's diets. Be wary of diet soda, as well. Diet soda doesn't have calories or sugar, but it also doesn't have any nutritional value. Juices and sodas often take the place of other nourishing beverages like milk, which is a major source of calcium needed for growing bones.
- **Don't be too restrictive.** Sweets and fast foods don't have to be completely eliminated; however, they should make up a very small part of your child's overall diet.

Also, don't put your child on a diet unless recommended by your child's doctor — too few calories can interfere with proper growth.

- **Limit television, video and computer time.** Time in front of the TV or on the computer has been linked to overweight. Time spent on these activities should be limited to an hour or two a day.
- **Focus on positive goals.** Find goals your child wants to achieve. A goal to be able to ride a bicycle for 20 minutes is positive, rather than a negative goal like losing weight.
- **Take small steps as a family.** Make sure changes are subtle and involve the whole family. It's better to substitute fruit in place of dessert than to omit dessert altogether. That way your child won't feel like there has been a revolution. Other examples of subtle changes you can make include parking your car a little farther away, not picking up fast food as often and taking a family walk in the evenings.

### **Careful, crucial communication**

Most overweight kids are fully aware of their weight. They likely have faced taunts and name-calling at school long before you thought to intervene. So don't be afraid to bring up the topic of health and fitness, but do be sensitive that your child may interpret your concern as an insult.

Open, non-judgmental communication will allow you to find out what they think about their weight and allow you to help them set positive goals and help them meet those goals. By modeling healthy-living habits, staying positive and — above all — letting your children know that they're loved no matter what, you'll find it's much easier to help your child lose weight without damaging his or her self-esteem.