

Too Much National Growth: Childhood Obesity

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

I am having a difficult time getting clothes to fit my five year old. The length of her pants is right but she cannot zip them up because of her tummy (well, actually — she isn't the only one with this problem!). Can a child this young be overweight?

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What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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– Solution –

It isn't the clothes

Unfortunately, your daughter's sweet belly is not baby fat. These days we hear more than ever about children's weight — and with good reason. According to the *American Obesity Association* the percentage of obese children more than doubled (7% to 15.3%) from mid-1970 to 2000, while the adolescent rate tripled (5% to 15.5%). Related to this shift is the appearance of *Type II Diabetes*, a disease once unheard of in children but which can lead to everything from heart problems to kidney failure. Estimates are that 2.7 million adolescents are at risk for developing this disease, in addition to the 39,000 who already have it.

It seems that we and our children have become as fat-drenched as the 1.85 billion pounds of chips we eat each year; more sugar-laden than the 20+ teaspoons of sugar our daily taste buds crave; and more loaded with extras than the 23 pounds (about 1/2 pound a week) per person of pizza that we consume annually. But food is simply part of the problem, and putting children on diets only piles on emotional poundage. A better approach is to slow weight gain and allow children to grow into added weight, a process that can take months or years — and requires a lifestyle change.

Lifestyle change back

Perhaps what we need to look at is not *lifestyle change* but rather a *lifestyle change back*. We haven't always been Pudgy People — so what about our lifestyle is different, and what can we learn from past lifestyle choices to help us improve upon today's? Thinking back, I came up with three differences that might offer some useful clues.

The rule in our family was that my brothers and I had to come inside 'when the streetlights went on'.

Where were we? Outside. True, I grew up in Arizona where the weather made year-round outdoor play easier; but my husband spent similar hours outdoors on the lots and streets around his New York City home in Queens. While I played hide-and-seek, practiced hopscotch, and plotted water balloon strategies, he was enjoying stickball, playing tag along city sidewalks, or pitching countless innings

of catch, with occasional tosses to the family dog (according to the *National Research Council*, one-fourth of today's dogs and cats are also obese).

And of course, we all walked and rode bikes. Which brings me to item #2.

We had a lot of Personal Mobility.

Bicycles gave us access to wide neighborhood territories. We had to get from place to place on our own, since most of us were one-car (at best) families. When we wanted to play at a friend's house (many of whom lived nearby) — we had to get there without parent chauffeurs. Walking (or running), bicycling, and later, public transportation were the means for getting to local grocery stores, swimming pools, and the neighborhood playground. All of which worked up healthy appetites, and hence we arrive at item #3.

We ate In — not Out.

Eating out was expensive and reserved for special treats, like the occasional Friday night fish and chips at *Pete's Drive-in* — memories of which still bring back mouth-watering nostalgia. Such times, by their rarity, became memorable.

Even though both of my parents worked, our family ate dinner at home and together (a practice now linked to both higher grades and lower drug and alcohol abuse). Often these meals were prepared in haste, as we all joined in to tear lettuce into pieces, season meat for broiling, or mash the night's potatoes. By now, you may expect me to recall the miles I trudged through slush and snow to get to that one-room schoolhouse on the prairie! (We did walk to school, but it only took about ten minutes, less if we made the effort.) But even without one-room schoolhouses, life today is different.

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Basic changes

Safety issues or crowded city living make even the idea of children roaming neighborhoods downright unthinkable. Even if it were safe to do so — by the time most parents finish work and children wrap up their sports practices, music or art lessons, and wade through the night's homework — the street lights will have long been burning.

And who has the energy to cook a meal at the end of a 12-hour day? Having said all of that, if we condense my three items down to their essentials, what we have are these lifestyle changes:

- #1 — physical activity and outdoor time
- #2 — less car time
- #3 — basic (unprocessed) food.

These three items are a close match for similar conclusions reported by *JAMA* on trends that may relate to today's childhood obesity: sedentary lifestyle (items #1 and #2); consumption of fast foods (item #3); and portion size, something much easier to control at home (item #3).

Another study in the *Journal of School Health* zeroes in on "screen time," associating television viewing with decreased activity (item #1) and contributing to both unhealthy food choices (through food advertising) and increased snacking (item #3). With these in mind, here are a few ways we can begin to *change back* our lifestyles and still remain in the twenty-first century.

Lifestyle change backs: physical activity

The easiest way to encourage physical activity is to unplug (or limit) use of "screens" (i.e., televisions, computer, and electronic toys). Watching television more

than two hours daily has been linked to obesity. Without "screen" time, children will find other things to do and eat fewer high-fat snacks. It may not be comforting information for tired parents, but the *National Association for Sport and Physical Education* tells us that toddlers and preschoolers shouldn't stay sedentary (sit still) for more than 60 minutes at a time, unless they are sleeping. Whew!

At least we can encourage their movement by providing props such as hula-hoops; inflatable balls for bouncing on; and trikes to ride over enclosed decks, in fenced backyards, or down hallways. Of course, children also do what they see, and overweight parents increase a child's risk of becoming overweight.

Our lifestyle and theirs go hand in hand. If you must keep the tube on — consider using exercise tapes together or try dancing with tambourines, maracas, or bells as you jump around and make noise. Moving together is fun!

Lifestyle change backs: car time

Let's move on — or more to the point — move on our own. It is true that outdoor time is not the option it once was, but we can get out of those cars. Among one daughter's favorite memories were the special times we shared when she and I walked together to her child care or school. It was time all to ourselves — with exercise as a side-bonus. A group in Seattle, Washington has begun an organization called *Feet First* to promote what they describe as a "Walking School Bus." They recruit parents and nearby seniors to accompany groups of children to school, opting out of using the school bus. The children arrive alert after a healthy walk; and with up to 25% of morning traffic related to transporting children to schools, a resurgence of walking means healthier air to breathe, perhaps triggering less asthma

(another growing childhood problem). It takes about 20 minutes to walk a slow-paced mile. Can you or your child walk for 20 minutes? Get out a neighborhood map and draw a circle with a one-mile radius from your home. Is there a library, grocery store, or park in that radius? If so, go there, have fun, rest a bit; and then walk another 20 minutes home again. This timeframe is close to the recommended 30-minutes of “moderate physical activity” described in the *Journal of School Health*.

If 20 minutes is the maximum time available, give your circle a half-mile radius or simply walk for 10 minutes, turn around and come back home. Sometimes the battle to buckle seatbelts takes at least that long. You may be amazed at how close things really are; and as your child gains skills, bicycling can increase the distances traveled.

Lifestyle *change backs*: eating ‘in’

Are you hungry yet? What, where, and who will provide that next meal? A key we discovered (my husband and I both worked full time) was very basic: PLANNING. The following strategies can make all the difference between eating in — and not bulging out (of those clothes).

Plan weekly menus

We made up a menu for the coming week, often as part of family meeting discussions, so that all family members got to have their say. If I made the stuffed peppers that several of us liked, I would include applesauce and baked potatoes for those who hated peppers. This was not easy but it paid off (cooperation is a primary aim of all discipline) and allowed us to use the next tip to our advantage.

Shop once a week

Make a grocery list based upon the week’s menu. We did one main shop-

ping trip each week; and when it was time to prepare a meal, all of the ingredients were available. This eliminated last-minute trips to the store when we were at our most tired, hungry, and cranky. The best discipline of all is prevention!

Hire help

(the permanent/non-human kind)

No, we did not have a *Cordon Bleu* chef, but we did have some four-star appliances: a crock-pot or slow cooker, a bread machine, and a freezer.

Before leaving for work in the morning, we would load the crock-pot with veggies and seasonings and the bread machine with flour and yeast and — 8 or 10 hours later, enter a house fragrant with the aromas of fresh-baked bread and tomato-rich soup. We got out the bowls and dinner was served.

The freezer was our other main kitchen partner. When my husband made a batch of cherry muffins or I rolled up a recipe of enchiladas, we would double or triple the recipes and have one meal that day and another frozen, ready to pop into the microwave as soon as we burst through the door. Dinner was ready almost before we had time to scatter our raincoats around the house.

Streetlights may be on — but pounds needn’t be

These are not the only solutions to a lifestyle *change back* nor are they always possible. Think about ways to tweak your lifestyle to encourage more physical activity; reframe your transportation to exclude cars whenever possible; or find ways to enjoy the fruits and vegetables of your own labors — well, maybe everyone’s zipper could be a bit easier to close. Even Fido might have a few less pounds to hoist the next time he leaps up to greet you beneath that streetlight’s fading glow.