

Parents Can Play a Role in Preventing Childhood Obesity

Poor eating and exercise patterns are often established during childhood. Fortunately, a healthy home environment can promote healthy habits and alter unhealthy habits. Parents (defined broadly to include primary caregivers) have a profound influence on children by promoting certain values and attitudes, by rewarding or reinforcing specific behaviors, and by serving as role models. Parents are the policy makers for the home. They make daily decisions on recreational opportunities, food available at home, and children's allowances; they determine the setting for foods eaten in the home; and they implement countless other rules and policies that influence how much various members of the family engage in healthful eating and physical activity. While this is good news, economic and time constraints, as well as the stresses and demands of daily living, often make healthful eating and increased physical activity challenging on a daily basis for many families.

Infancy

Research suggests that breastfeeding helps protect infants from becoming obese children, although there are many other factors that may impact the role of breastfeeding in reducing the risk of obesity. Infants have a preference for sweet and salty tastes and concern has been expressed that early introduction of sweetened beverages and high-fat/sweet foods to infants may be important contributors to childhood obesity.

Toddlers and Young Children

If children are given numerous opportunities to try new foods without being forced to eat them, many of these foods, even if initially rejected, will become part of their diet. Both parents and childcare and preschool settings can effectively encourage children to develop a healthy and varied diet through non-coercive persistence. Parents and other caregivers also can teach children to eat reasonable amounts by controlling portion sizes and encouraging children to stop eating when they feel full. While young children seem naturally able to choose appropriate portion sizes and to eat only until they are no longer hungry, by the age of 5, research reveals that they become more

responsive to external cues and are more prone to eat everything they are presented without responding to satiety cues that signal that they are full.

Older Children and Youth

As they develop, children begin to make their own choices at school and in other away-from-home settings. They also increasingly influence family food purchases. Parents can promote healthful food selections during this time by making nutritious foods available at home and by encouraging family meal times. Studies show that the more families eat together, the more likely older children and adolescents will consume fruits, vegetables, grains, and calcium-rich foods.

Sweetened Beverages

Much remains to be learned about the association between childhood obesity and the consumption of sweetened beverages, such as soft drinks and flavored drinks that do not contain 100 percent fruit juice. These beverages do not provide essential nutrients needed by growing children, but do increase their calorie intake. By 14 years of age, 32 percent of adolescent girls and 52 percent of boys in the United States are consuming three or more eight-ounce servings of sweetened soft drinks daily, and one study reported that infants as young as seven months old are drinking sweetened sodas. Because of concerns about excessive consumption of sweetened beverages in place of more nutrient-rich or lower-calorie alternatives, children should be encouraged to avoid high-calorie, nutrient-poor beverages.

Physical Activity

Although there is a general sense that many children are less physically active than in past generations, data is still being collected to show the specific trends that have occurred. Even so, parents should be supportive of their children's athletic and other physical activity interests and enhance opportunities for them to play outside and engage in both recreational activities as well as incorporating an active lifestyle into daily routines (e.g., walking or biking to the grocery store).

Television Viewing and Recreational Screen Time

A complementary strategy for promoting physical activity among children and youth is to decrease their inactivity and sedentary behaviors. One study found that those youth who watched more than five hours of television (TV) per day were 4.6 times as likely to be obese as those watching no TV or up to two hours daily. Other studies have reported similar associations or suggest that TV displaces other more physical activities. Two school-based studies have also demonstrated that reducing TV viewing time was associated with reductions in body weight, body fat, and obesity prevalence. Parents should limit their children's TV viewing and other recreational screen time such as video or computer game playing to less than two hours per day.

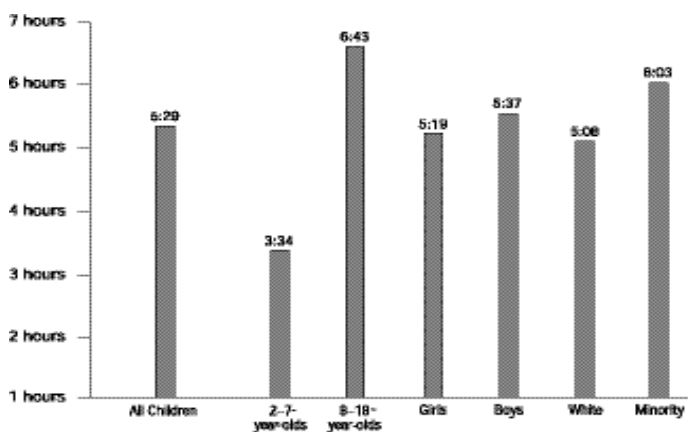


Figure 1. Media Use Among Children By Age. Media use include television, video games, radios, cassette tape players, VCRs, compact disc players, and computers. SOURCE: Roberts et al., 1999. This information was reprinted with permission from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

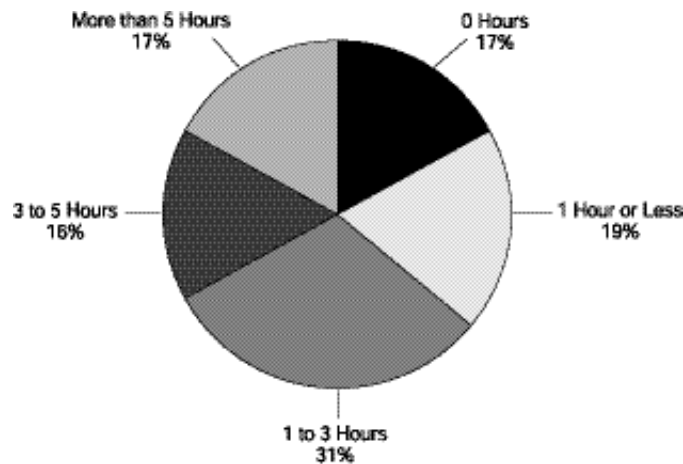


Figure 2. Daily Television Viewing by Children and Youth in Hours SOURCE: Roberts et al., 1999. This information was reprinted with permission from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Parents as Role Models

Parents can set a good example for their children by modeling healthful eating behaviors and being physically active. Parents can also be effective advocates by becoming involved in efforts in their neighborhoods, schools, and community to improve neighborhood safety and to expand the access and availability of opportunities for physical activity and healthful eating such as recreational facilities, playgrounds, sidewalks, bike paths, and farmers' markets.

ACTIONS FOR PARENTS

Parents should promote healthful eating behaviors and regular physical activity for their children.

Choose exclusive breastfeeding as the method for feeding infants for the first four to six months of life.

Provide healthful food and beverage choices for children by carefully considering nutrient quality and energy density.

Assist and educate children in making healthful decisions regarding types of foods and beverages to consume, how often, and in what portion size.

Encourage and support regular physical activity.

Limit children's television viewing and other recreational screen time to fewer than two hours per day.

Discuss weight status with their child's health-care provider and monitor age- and gender-specific body mass index (BMI) percentile.

Serve as positive role models for their children regarding eating and physical-activity behaviors.