

Curbing Obesity in Children (What we all should know and what we all can do)

For a kid growing up in New York City in the 1980's, there were always outdoor activities that we loved to play (some of which we actually invented). The school year was filled with punch ball games in the morning, tag or running bases during recess and two-handed touch football in the afternoon. The scorching hot summers in Brooklyn were spent on the black asphalt basketball court, in the schoolyard playing "Strike Em Out" or multiple games of handball. If we didn't walk to the park, there was always three second hold football in the street or stoop ball. In those days, you didn't stay inside, because everyone was outside. Late afternoons when the sun went down, we'd hop on our bikes or walk up and down the streets of Bedford Stuyvesant meeting up with friends. If you wanted to visit your girlfriend that didn't live in the neighborhood, you walked or hopped on your bike and rode fifteen miles each way. Heck we got in better shape in the summertime than in PE class in school. Ah, those were the days.

In this discussion of obesity, we are not speaking of a subjective societal label meant to degrade and restrict. We are not just talking about being simply overweight. We are talking about a sufficient excess of weight which creates health issues, combined with a less than active lifestyle. We are also discussing those choices which could create lifelong habits which lead to an even more unhealthy life.

Children today lead more sedentary lives than 20-30 years ago. Part of this is safety: there are more dangers facing children now than ever. Parents have to be careful of leaving their children to travel unattended through any neighborhood. Now when children talk about sports, they invariably mean a new video game like the new "Madden Football". Madden is EA Sports® biggest franchise in the United States. Opening in 2001 with 1 million sales for the year, Madden 09 reached 2.3 million in 1 month in 2008. The video game has sold 70 million copies since it's inception in 1998. American children average 3 hours per day watching television or playing video games. The tv or video games themselves are not the full problem. Having a balance of indoor and outdoor (or inactive and active) activities is.

Kids are driven to school rather than walking or biking (again, often for safety reasons). Our children have to be forced to participate in physical education classes (if those classes are even offered). Did you know that Illinois is the only state in America that requires daily physical education classes from kindergarten through high school? Ironically in Alabama (home of the nation's highest rate of obesity for adults - at 30%), it is mandatory until 8th grade. In America, 4% of elementary schools, 8% of middle schools and 2% of high schools offer physical education classes. 22% of schools do not even require students to take physical education classes. This is a leading factor in the state of health for American children today.

The profound effect of lack of exercise and poor nutrition has forced North Carolina (and America in general) into one of the worst crises for our children in history. North Carolina has the 5th highest rate of obesity for children (ages 10-17). (Washington DC is first with 22.8 percent.) Nationally the percentage of overweight kids is 35% (ages 2-19) with the obesity rate at 16%. Eight of the ten states with the highest rates of overweight children are in the South. From 1980-2007, the rate of overweight children in America has more than tripled. As a

result, our children are more at risk for heart disease than our adults. Statistics have shown 80% of all overweight children become overweight adults. Obesity has now become the most common chronic disease amongst children in America. The question now is what preventive measures can be taken to decrease these statistics and prepare our children for a healthier lifestyle as they mature.

PE4Life, in Naperville, Illinois, is a non-profit model program that encourages teachers to be creative in curriculum development for kids to keep them moving and exercising. The program focuses on "increasing fitness levels and improving academic performance, while decreasing disciplinary incidents" Only 3% of students at Naperville are overweight. The program works. More communities across America are taking charge of their children's lives. In North Carolina 1 in 3 children, ages 10-17, are overweight. That's almost 300,000 children in the state.

Jonathan P. Nettles thinks the responsibility and accountability has to begin in the home, but the school system should also play a role. Nettles, teacher at Jordan High School in Durham, has been an administrator and teacher in the North Carolina Public School System for 9 years. Nettles teaching career began after 20 years in the United States Armed Services. "I would estimate when I was growing up, 1 in 8 kids in our school were overweight; now the ratio is more like 1 in 3. We'd always had mandatory PE classes. Now that is not the case." One major reason for the rise of obesity is technology. Kids aren't encouraged to go outside and play anymore. The influx of video games, MTV, and music videos are keeping kids on the couch glued to the television. The images on these shows and in the music world show a counterculture of weight acceptance. This is an extreme counter to the country's often preoccupation with being skinny (which is not the same thing as being fit or healthy). For example, some of the more prominent figures in music and acting - Rosie O'Donnell, Roseanne Barr, Monique, Fat Joe, and the late Biggie Smalls. Our kids are often drawn to these extremes - either starving themselves to look skinny or embracing overconsumption.

"Old school" recording artists The Fat Boys and Heavy D made their weight a point of emphasis in their music. The Fat Boys Mark Morales a.k.a. Prince Markie Dee, Damon Wimberly a.k.a. Kool Rock-Ski and Darren Robinson a.k.a. The Human Beat Box, produced seven albums including their 1985 "All You Can Eat" smash hit from the Krush Groove soundtrack, celebrating their passion for consuming large amounts of food. Their 1984 debut album, *The Fat Boys* featured the trio eating an extra large pizza pie on the album cover. Sadly, "The Human Beat Box" Robinson died in December, 1995 at the age of 28 of cardiac arrest weighing a reported 450 pounds.

Dwight Errington Myers a.k.a. The Overweight Lover MC Heavy D, though "overweight" was nimble on his feet and most of his videos featured creative dance moves that he performed with his backup group "the Boyz" (Troy "Trouble T Roy" Dixon, Glen "G-Wiz" Parrish and Eddie "DJ Eddie F Ferrell"). At his heaviest, some years ago, Heavy weighed 395 pounds. Standing at 6'2", he says he lost 160 pounds in three years. "I do cardio in the mornings, 45 minutes on the treadmill. I lift weights three or four times a week and then I do cardio again either by boxing, running or walking a steep hill." Heavy D recently has turned to acting with supporting roles in the series *Boston Public* and *The Tracey Morgan Show*, and has just released a new album "Vibes" via itunes.

More recently, there is the story of up and coming rapper Christopher Rios, know commercially as The Big Punisher. After a string of hits via collaborations with other artists, most notably Fat Joe, Big Pun's 1998 debut, *Capital Punishment*, was the first album by a solo Latino rapper to go platinum, peaking at #5 on the Billboard 200. *Capital Punishment* was also nominated for a Grammy, but lost out on the award to Jay-Z's *Vol. 2: Hard Knock Life*. "Big Pun's rap career was cut short in 2000 at the age of 28 by a massive heart attack due to his morbid obesity, leaving behind his wife Liza and three children. Rios had struggled with his weight most of his life and it was reported at the time of his death that he weighed 698 pounds.

There are all different shapes and body types among children and adults. We have to be careful not to confuse self esteem and personal appreciation as being counter to a healthy lifestyle. We are not trying to advocate (or vilify) any one body type over another. We are trying to ensure that whatever your body type, you are reasonably healthy and active. Extremes of weight gain or weight loss are unhealthy and create chronic health issues. The investment of time when younger will pay dividends in a healthier older age.

Our children are no longer being encouraged to exercise. In 1995, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) published recommendations of a minimum, 30 minutes of daily moderate physical activity for all children and adults. This amount increases to 60 minutes daily for weight loss. Ten years later, the USDA introduced the 2008 Activity Pyramid (for ages 16-64) which stresses reduction of physical inactivity, 2-3 times per week of strengthening and stretching and a recommended 3-5 times per week of aerobic activity (for at least 30 minutes each session). These are the first activity guidelines the federal government has ever issued. It raises two questions: Why has it taken so long? and where are the children getting their thirty minutes of exercise per day if not in school?

Preventive measures are the key. When purchasing our first car, one of the first things our parents taught us was "preventive maintenance". Change the oil every 3,000 miles, have the car aligned every six months, and get a tune-up once per year. Most car manufacturers provide you with a book to chronicle your preventive maintenance schedule. Why do we take better care of our automobiles than our own children?

Where is the "preventive measures" guide for parenting? Why do we tend to wait until a problem arises before we focus on a solution? For example: How often do you weigh your child? Do you monitor their daily activities? Do you monitor their calorie intake along with saturated fat and sodium levels? The time has come for us to "pre-habilitate" our lives and those of our children. Here are several "preventive measures" that can be used to prepare our children to live a longer healthy life and halt the growing epidemic of obesity in America.

Controlling Portions- When did "super size" become a portion? The "*supersize*" craze began in the mid 1990's with McDonald's offering of the super sized menu. Advertised as a "value", customers were invited to upgrade their meal by increasing their portions by 33% while "saving" money on the entire "meal" of sandwich, side and drink. The success of the "supersize" menu got Wendy's and Burger King to follow suit. In 2004, shortly after the Morgan Spurlock movie, *Supersize Me*, which chronicled the effects of a steady diet of fast food, McDonald's pulled Supersize from their menu. The only item now available now during the summer is the *Hugo* which is 410 calories in a 42 ounce soda.

The *Food Pyramid Guide to Health* recommendation for a portion is 4 ounces for meats and 3 ounces for side dishes. An example would be one medium chicken breast and one medium baked potato. The increase in portion size is a strong indicator to the rise in weight in America. Weren't we always taught to "*finish your plate*" while growing up? Parents need to begin to exercise control over the portions their children are now eating while dining out and while eating at home.

One recommendation is to decrease the size of the plate (most dinner plates are 10.5 inch plates) by 1/3 so filling the plate would still be adhering to portions. Another option is to buy foods in bulk and portion them off before cooking. This saves money and helps control overeating. Parents also need to ask the same questions of school administrations regarding portion sizes in schools. Children generally eat 1-2 meals at school. Teach your child about correct portion sizes at home so they will be used to it and make smart choices at school.

Creating and Serving Healthy Meals- While in school, children spend 6-9 hours away from home. Are they armed with snacks or do they have to wait for the cafeteria to eat their first meal after leaving home? 9 hours is enough time for 2-3 small meals. Send your child to school with healthy snacks such as apples, raisins, bananas, or trail mix bars. This gives the child a healthy option to satisfy their hunger and not overindulge at the school recess time. Plan ahead and buy these healthy snacks once per week when you shop for produce so they are always fresh. Become a concerned parent and check the menus at your child's school. They are now posted on line the week prior to serving so you can see what your child is eating. Irregular eating habits have shown to decrease focus in school. It is very difficult for a "hungry" child to maintain focus in class. Become active in your school and ask questions if you are not satisfied about the menu selections (remember your taxpayer dollars are paying for it!). Plan your child's school menu with them so they know in advance what to eat and why they need to make those choices. Education will be the fundamental deterrent to making unhealthy choices.

While at home, plan ahead for your children's meals. Remember your children look up to you as a parent so it would be beneficial if you adopt a similar healthy attitude towards proper nutrition. Teach your child how to cook healthy meals (baking, roasting, and grilling are excellent cooking techniques to limit saturated fats). If you are a working parent and no one is home to greet the child when they return from school, cook the meal the day before and leave your child instructions on how to heat it up in the microwave or in the oven. Excellent options for "after school" meals are green salad with protein, pasta dishes with red sauce or cold salads. These require minimum preparation prior to serving.

Spending time teaching children about nutrition and exercise

Nationally, one in 15 school age children are obese. How many hours per day do you spend with your child teaching them about the importance of exercise and proper nutrition? The start of the day during breakfast is the perfect time to stress the importance of a healthy meal. If you have access to the school's breakfast or lunch menu, go over it with your child and help them choose healthy options. Create fun and challenging games for your children to encourage balance and stability and coordination. Make your child a part of the cooking and eating process. Shop for foods together and teach them about nutritious items. Support healthy and positive messages about exercise and nutrition.

Troy K. Weaver is the Head of School at Union Independent School in Durham. Weaver, born in Jamaica Queens, came to Duke University and became a pediatrician. After getting the "teaching bug" he has spent the last 22 years in education. In 2002, he became the inaugural headmaster of Durham Nativity School - a private, tuition-free, all-male middle school in Northeast-Central Durham, where he also taught science, religion and math. Located on Roxboro Road, the school is scheduled to open in mid-July 2009. Union is focused on the holistic approach to education focusing on the mind, body and soul. The 49,000 square foot facility will open serving grades K-2 with a maximum of 20 students per grade, and eventually offer classes up to 8th grade.

"Our goal is to make this school a model for schools nationwide. The school will be community based with our fitness and wellness center accessible to students, parents and the community. We will have a health and wellness clinic on site, along with a full fitness center and indoor walking track."

Union Independent School, a state of the art educational facility, is located in one of the most economically depressed areas of Durham with an average household income under \$20,000 per year. One of the primary challenges for the school and the students is to carry what is taught into the home. Weaver says, "We will be community-based with day care and after hour day care. We will have mandatory meetings with parents and also host monthly workshops focusing on nutrition and exercise. We expect to interface often with parents with encouragement about eating and living healthier. The parents are the role models. Our meals prepared in our full service kitchen will be prepared fresh. In addition we will provide our students with healthy snacks throughout the day."

Weaver, a Southern boy at heart says, "Regarding nutrition, we have grown up in a community where more food equals more love. We need to look at our styles of cooking and encourage different cooking methods including grilling and roasting to eliminate the excess saturated fats. At Union, we will feed our kids healthy and wholesome meals to encourage and introduce a healthy environment and which also will allow for them to focus on academic performance."

Accountability from parents and administrators

In a 1993 Nike commercial, NBA basketball superstar, Charles Barkley, infamously proclaimed "I am not a role model". Sir Charles was correct. Parents, you are the role model for your children. Granted, if you have not been one, right now is the time to start. Children learn their habits at a young age from their parents. Parents have the responsibility and accountability to provide positive lessons to their children.

Many high schoolers lead a structured life in high school, consisting of scheduled meals, homework, fun time and curfew. Some have already begun to experience more freedom, even in high school. College presents plenty of challenges not only in the classroom but nutritionally. No longer are meals prepared at home, now students are left to fend for themselves and there are a lot of businesses that want their attention and invest a lot of money to get it.

Most college towns have plenty of fast food-type businesses on campus or around campus offering discounts to students. "10% off, Buy one get one free, etc." It would be accurate to say all of the offerings are not the most healthy selections. However, what really are your choices if you don't know how to cook? Fast foods can contain alarming amounts of saturated fat. Packaged frozen foods contain large amounts of sodium (remember, the RDA is only 2400mg per day). High sodium can lead to chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and (you guessed it) obesity. Again, this points to the importance of parents teaching children at an early age about nutrition.

With the national average at 66% of Americans overweight or obese, that number might be a little higher at colleges. At North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina, the number might be as high as 50%. Overweight and obesity statistics for African Americans are higher than average - 78% for women and 68% for men.

Dr. Kevin Rome, Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at North Carolina Central University says "The questions are how often the students have been exposed to proper nutrition and the concept of weight training. We need to look at incentives for our students to be healthy. Monitoring weight, blood pressure, and cholesterol. We cannot force students to eat healthy but we can provide healthy options and begin to create a "healthier environment".

NCCU does not have an orientation program for freshmen... yet. Dr. Rome, only 10 months on the job, sees that coming. "We have to look at a long term strategy. All four years, students should have access to information and education to enhance fitness and wellness in their lives via classes and seminars. This can't be a one shot deal. There has to be continuous education. The impact of this education may not be immediate but 10 years down the road when the student becomes an adult with children, this education will help to develop positive nutrition and exercise for their children."

On the campus of NCCU, the Fitness and Wellness Center is open from 6am-7:45am Monday through Friday and 5pm-11pm on Monday – Wed and 5pm-9pm Thursday and Friday. The Center houses free weight, Nautilus and cardiovascular equipment. NCCU has classes on fitness and nutrition available for all students. Dr. Rome says "For students that need intervention we have solutions. Our counseling center is available along with nutritionists to help the student develop a strategy incorporating nutrition and exercises to achieve their goals."

On the campus of NCCU, the new Pearson Dining Hall opened on March 15th after a two year hiatus. The 56,000 square foot multilevel facility, located on Lawson Street, seats 1200 with an expansive audio-visual system and several cooked-to-order food stations. Pearson has over 7 food stations including the following: Pasta, sandwiches, green salad, and pizza. The daily menu is posted on the NCCU website. Sandwiches, pasta and the international cuisine stations are cooked to order.

We need to develop programs to identify kids at risk for obesity and through a coordinated effort between school administrators and parents, organize monthly meetings to address the concerns and develop solutions to the problems. Ignoring the problem will not make it magically disappear. Children under the age of 17 will adapt to a lifestyle change quicker and easier than an adult would. Again, this all goes back to the parent as the role model in the household. It is much easier for a child to emulate a positive role model than not.

We need to avoid isolating and stigmatizing weight in either a positive or negative model. Our goal is health. With good diet and exercise anyone can be healthy. Grossly underweight or grossly overweight are not healthy models. But being healthy does not always mean being lean. It is not always necessary to be a weekend warrior or amateur athlete. Your daily activity could be walking, parking further away in a mall parking lot (rather than closer), using strip malls and walking from one end to the other to run your errands, rather than driving between stores, swimming at a local YMCA or community center, adult sports leagues which emphasize fun (like bowling, softball, basketball, etc), in addition to newer activities such as yoga, martial arts, pilates, etc. The approach with children is similar with adults – the activities have to be something that you enjoy. That would encourage you to keep doing them.

There is no easy solution. We have to develop a long term strategy to address all of the issues including increased education, support from parents and the school system. In the short term, we can take our children to the park on weekends, or during school breaks. We can create partnerships with trusted neighbor's or the parents of your children's friends, to support group physical activities where they can be safe and yet spend time together. Time's a-wastin', let's get it done.

Statistics for America

34% over weight kids (2-19) in nation (16% obese)

66% overweight adults in nation (33% obese)

% overweight black adults in nation (78%women and 67%men)

30% black men and 58% black women obese

Since 1980, obesity rates for adults have doubled and rates for children have tripled

Overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults (this increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese)