



Parents can influence kids weight gain

The expanding waistline of American children has been big news. The prevalence of obesity in children and teens in the past 40 years has more than tripled in the United States, going to 15 percent from 4 percent.

The problem is a growing imbalance between the amount of calories eaten and the amount used for physical activity. Since overweight kids are more likely to be obese adults and suffer from chronic diseases, health authorities focus heavily on early prevention.

A study in the May issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* done in Houston identified a number of critical weight control issues for 8- to 10-year-old middle-class African-American girls and their parents.

Question: Did parents look at diet and exercise behaviors the same as their children did?

Answer: In many cases, the perception of the parent was different than that of the child. For example, parents said that their daughters ate fruits and vegetables at school lunch. However,

the girls reported eating none at school.

Parents thought that their daughters spent one to two hours per day in front of the television. However, the girls reported spending an average of three hours per day, plus about one hour per day working or playing on the computer because there was nothing better to do.

Most parents said that their daughters liked physical education classes. Although some girls said they did like PE, they disliked running and activities like jumping rope by themselves. Social enjoyment of the activity was more likely to stimulate their participation.

Q: How did parents influence the behavior of their daughters?

A: Parents served as role models. However, the girls perceived their fathers as being active and their mothers most likely in the role of spectators. This hints strongly that the mother's role as an active woman could be especially

beneficial as an influence on this age group.

Both parents and girls displayed knowledge of healthful eating, but their behavior did not always match their knowledge. Like most studies of contemporary food habits, time constraints of modern life and the desire for convenience were major determinants of the foods consumed.

Q: What should parents do to help their daughters maintain a healthy weight?

A: According to the results, parents need to be good role models for healthy eating and regular physical activity, and can help by encouraging family physical activity and by providing opportunities for fun physical activities.

Like previous studies, this one found that the foods most commonly eaten while watching television are snacks high in fat and calories. Consequently, finding physical activities to replace television watching can both increase calories burned and decrease calories eaten.

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