

Six Ways To Fight Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity has become an ever-increasing, serious problem in the United States over the last several decades. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stated childhood obesity is the fastest growing health crisis in the United States. Over the past thirty years, the rate of obesity has more than tripled for children aged 6 to 11 and more than doubled for adolescents aged 12 to 19. It's been approximated that more than 33% of youths aged 2 to 19 are overweight or obese. That's more than 25 million kids!

Being an overweight or obese child has an enormous impact on physical, mental, and emotional health along with social and overall development. Research has shown overweight or obese children have a higher risk of developing Type II diabetes, asthma, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and even certain types of cancer.

Kids who are overweight or obese have a poor self-image, low self-esteem, and a tendency to withdraw from social experiences. These kids are more likely to experience loneliness, sadness, nervousness, anxiety and depression. Children can also be subjected to social stigmatization and discrimination. They are more likely to be teased and bullied by other kids, creating or intensifying social and emotional problems. Kids who carry too much weight are also more easily fatigued and so tend to become less active, which means they are at a higher risk of gaining more weight, creating a vicious cycle.

Dr. Hassan Alzein of Alzein Pediatrics in Evergreen Park and Oak Lawn, Illinois is here to help, with 6 ways to encourage your children towards achieving and maintaining a health weight.

1 - Live A Healthy Lifestyle Yourself

Asking your child to do something you are unwilling to do yourself will result in poor outcomes for both of you. "Practice what you preach" to encourage your kids. Stay active, eat healthy foods and involve your kids in doing the same. Ask your pediatrician to educate both you and your children about proper nutrition and safe exercise and activities. When kids are fully informed, they make more intelligent choices for themselves!

2 – Offer Only Healthy Snacks

If kids are hungry between meals, offer a fruit or veggie instead of ice cream or chips. Keep high sugar, high salt and highly processed snacks out of the house and out of their diet – if you don't offer it, they can't eat it or acquire a taste for it. Ants on a Log - celery with peanut butter and raisins – or Greek yogurt with berries are yummy alternatives. Make homemade trail mix! You'll save money and skip all the added sugars, salt, and preservatives found in many store-bought trail mixes. Visit the bulk bins at your grocery store and combine a variety of nuts with a limited amount of dried fruits and whole wheat pretzels. In the summer, frozen grapes are nature's best Popsicle!

3 - Drink Water Instead of Juice or Soda

Teach your kids how important it is to stay hydrated throughout the day. Make sure your kids have their own cups or reusable water bottles and can access the sink faucet or refrigerator water dispenser. Even the youngest children can get a drink by themselves – and they will love to do it! Avoid the added sugars in fruit juice, fruit drinks and sodas but keep the flavor by adding lemon slices, cucumbers slices, a spring of mint or handful of frozen cherries.

4 - Make Healthy Eating a Hands-On Experience

Research shows that kids who spend more time in the kitchen choose a wider range of foods and make healthier decisions. Make your next grocery store visit a game and ask them to get a fruit or vegetable from every color of the rainbow. Let them select items that are unusual or uncommon – it may become your family's newest favorite! When kids pick their own produce, they are more likely to try and enjoy them. Suggest alternatives for regular pasta, such as whole-wheat pasta or even zucchini noodles or spaghetti squash. In the kitchen, even the youngest children, after proper handwashing, can tear lettuce, sprinkle toppings, stir and mix ingredients. As they get older, you can add supervised peeling, cutting and serving to their responsibilities.

5 - Get 60 Minutes of Physical Activity Per Day

It's important for children to get up (preferably outside!) and move around, as it benefits both their physical and mental health. Incorporate movement into daily life as much as possible; walk to the store for milk, walk to school or the library, make sure your puppy gets a good walk every day. Throw "Dance Parties", playing music as loud as you can tolerate and encouraging your children to twist, twirl, jump, swivel and move. Give your children chores that help them move,

like gardening or washing the car. For birthday or holiday gifts, consider tennis lessons or rock-climbing gift certificates. Take family bike rides to make a big impact on your child's interest in exercise and physical activity.

6 - Limit Screen Time

Between smartphones, video games and personal computers, kids have more technology at their disposal than ever before. While there's nothing wrong with enjoying these devices in moderation, indulging in technology has become many children's default leisure activity. You know yourself how easy it is to find you've been sitting for hours on end, staring at a screen. Set a time limit of 30 to 60 minutes a day of recreational screen time, depending upon their age. It's also perfectly okay to use their 30-60 minutes of screen time as a reward for being active – your child can't go online until they've gone for a walk with you!

Preventing or reversing childhood obesity is a lifelong gift you can give your children. Helping them avoid being overweight or obese means helping them lower their risk of lasting health problems. As a parent, you are the most important influence in their health and emotional well-being. Lead by example. Keep it fun. Your children will follow your lead.