

# Overweight Children – What Can A Parent Do To Help?

By Lindsay Small, for [www.ActivityVillage.co.uk](http://www.ActivityVillage.co.uk)

## A Growing Number of Overweight Children

The latest figures released in the US state that 15 percent of children and teenagers are now considered overweight, up from 6% 20 years ago. Statistics in the UK are similar, and rising. Whilst children starve in Africa, kids in the Western world are lining up to suffer a frightening array of weight-related illnesses, including skin and joint problems, early osteoporosis, type II diabetes, bowel cancer, high blood pressure, heart attack and strokes. Recent research also suggests that obese kids are 77% more likely to suffer from asthma.

And of course in a world where TV, movies, teenage sitcoms and advertising all promote the ideal image and the “fat kid” is often mocked and made the butt of all the jokes, many overweight children will increasingly suffer from lack of confidence and poor self-esteem, leading to isolation and possibly depression in their teenage years.

## Why do the numbers of overweight children keep going up?

Portion sizes – at school, restaurants and home – keep growing

Children have far more choice in what they eat (previous generations ate what they were given, or went hungry)

Food is much more easily available

Kids' drinks, fizzy drinks and so-called “sports” drinks abound

Many snack foods and junk foods are specially targeted at kids, advertised to kids on TV, of little nutritional value, and far from “filling”. Some nutritionists even suspect that chemical additives can make your child crave more of particular foods

Fast food outlets have proliferated in recent years and provide cheap, easy meals for time-stretched parents

Kids expect “instant gratification” in many areas of their lives, including food. Living with hunger pangs – even for an hour – is no longer an option!

Parents are often setting a bad example

Children no longer walk or cycle to school – or much at all! Outdoor activities are much less a part of their lives than in previous generations

Spare time is spent on more sedentary pursuits, such as television, computers and video games, and even “texting”. The latest figures suggest that the average American teenager spends a horrifying 4 to 5 hours a day watching television

## **How can we help our overweight child to lose weight?**

Firstly, it is important to be aware that there is no magic formula and no instant solution. Your child will not be fit, healthy and the perfect weight overnight! If, however, your child eats sensibly and healthily and increases their physical activities, they will “grow into” their weight.

Secondly, it is vital that any approach you choose does not make your child feel different, guilty, victimised or unhappy in any way. Young children who worry about their weight grow into teenagers with eating disorders.

Thirdly, remember that by “banning” any foods you are likely to create rebellious feelings even in younger children, and disobeying your dictates may even turn into a game (or worse, a shameful secret). You are never going to be able to totally prevent a child from eating what he likes. If you forbid chocolate in your own house, for example, you can be sure your child will be eating it at friends’ houses or at school if he gets half the chance!

### **Make weight loss a family affair**

The most successful approach is to make your child’s weight loss a family affair. That doesn’t mean that you should single out your child and make the whole family responsible for making sure that they “stick to a diet”. It does mean that the whole family should join in, eating the same healthier foods, increasing their activity levels, and generally improving their lifestyle along with the overweight child.

Obviously this is going to be easier to carry off if your children are young. You can be a direct influence on young children as you are the one buying, preparing, and serving the food, and providing the activities!

### **“Brainwash” younger children while you can!**

Young children are very susceptible to their parents’ attitudes and absorb much of their wisdom willingly! If you casually mention the chemicals and additives in a packet of crisps or a fizzy drink, and read out the ingredients (or better yet, get your child to read or even write them out), you can start to influence the way that children think about food at an early age. Ask your child whether they would prefer to drink a fizzy apple-flavored drink, or eat an apple off the tree. Compare the look and the smell of the two options. Read out that list of chemicals, while polishing the apple to a shine. Make sure that you choose the apple! Most kids aren’t stupid and, if left entirely to their own devices, will gravitate to the real food. Keep up the subtle brainwashing and you will find that children choose the healthier options of their own accord, without feeling like they are missing out at all, and then you have won half the battle!

### **Encourage your children to see beyond the advertising and packaging**

Examine foods often. Buy, and eat, the odd candy bar and then see if you can work out, with your child, what was in it. Can they recognise any part of that candy bar as “real” food? What does it smell like? Does it smell better before or after you eat it? What are the ingredients? How processed are they? Then look at a cherry, or grape, or even a raisin. Ask questions. Do I know what is in this? Which is more real? Which is more natural? Which fills me up more? Which is better for me? Which leaves a better taste in my mouth?

Sit down with your kids in front of the television and watch a load of advertisements together. Ask the kids to choose a food product which they think is designed especially for them, and which they will enjoy. Go out and buy it. Examine it. Subject it to the tests outlined above. Ask questions about the advertising. Why do companies advertise? What are they trying to achieve? Who are they advertising for? Do the advertisements help you? Do they serve any purpose? Even the youngest children will be

able to participate in this sort of discussion with help, and becoming resistant to advertising is a very useful lesson to learn young!

## **Pay attention to portion sizes**

Portion sizes have grown enormously over recent years. If you watch an overweight child and a healthy-weight child eating side by side, it is often the portion sizes that are the only difference. Restaurants serve ever-increasing amounts. Canteen-style catering at schools encourages bigger helpings. And parents are unfortunately often guilty of loading far too much onto their children's plates and encouraging them to "eat up".

Unfortunately, if your child is overweight and you drastically cut their portion sizes overnight, they are going to feel very hungry and unsatisfied. A better approach is to make very gradual changes and reductions. Begin by loading the plate with a larger proportion of green, orange or red vegetables and reducing the starch and protein accordingly. Reduce the overall amount of food in very, very small steps, and your child may not even be aware that it is happening. And of course, if they finish their plate and want more, provide more – but again concentrate on filling up with the healthier foods first.

## **Trust your kids' appetites**

Kids' appetites vary from day to day and from meal to meal. Sometimes there are so many interesting things going on around them that they don't want to waste time finishing what is on their plate. What a great attitude (and unfortunately one which many adults have forgotten)! Sometimes kids are "starving" and can eat plateful after plateful of dinner. At other times they can't force themselves to eat half a plate. Trust their instincts. After all, as adults we often have to re-educate ourselves to listen to our true appetite rather than scraping our plates clean because of the way we were conditioned by our parents. It seems a shame to do the same to our kids – and yet, when we have gone to the expense and effort of putting a plate of food in front of them, we all do it!

## **Getting co-operation from healthy-weight siblings**

While in some families all family members could do with losing a little weight and improving their fitness, other families may have only one, unfortunate, overweight child. In this case their siblings may well prove a problem. Younger children should not be a concern: they will happily join in with the family if you provide the right direction and cheerful attitude.

Older kids and teenagers, on the other hand, may kick up a fuss! If you have a teenager who is a healthy weight, they may well resent "giving up" the junk food which doesn't seem to have any impact on them. In this case you will need to take them aside and explain that you are trying to improve the whole family's health, with the whole family's co-operation. Eating three packets of crisps a day may not be giving them a weight problem now, but it might catch up with them later, and it is certainly not a healthy way to live! Read out those chemicals and additives again. Point out that their sibling's weight problem may one day be their own, and ask that if they really can't give up their junk food habits, they keep them well out of sight.

Remember that many teenagers go through a stage of disliking and being jealous of their siblings. They may feel that the overweight sibling is getting all the attention. If you emphasise the fact that the whole family must improve their health and try to find ways of doing it together, you might avoid a problem. Perhaps the healthy-weight sibling has always longed for judo lessons, or swimming lessons, or access to an exercise bike? Include him or her in the family fitness plan.

## **Put the emphasis on healthy eating and lifestyle**

Much anxiety about food, including problems with eating disorders in teenage and later years, can be avoided if we put the emphasis on eating a healthy diet rather than "giving up" and "restricting" certain foods, which by careful conditioning we have all come to see as "treats". Never talk about "putting

your child on a diet". Instead, boast within earshot of friends of how your whole family has made real inroads into eating more healthily. Try not to be too obvious about restricting "bad" foods – just encourage "good" foods by providing them more regularly.

Watch your own actions and those of other adults. Don't make a fuss about chocolate, for example. Don't glorify it, and don't vilify it either. Chocolate is neither good, nor bad. Chocolate is food. It might not be very nutritious food, but it is hardly Public Enemy Number One! If you put chocolate in its proper place ("a type of sweet food which we eat occasionally") then your child will do the same.

## **Start by adding in the good food**

To begin with, add in as much good food as you can. Concentrate on what you are adding to the family meal rather than what you are taking away. Fill up on vegetables, whole grains, lean meat and other healthy forms of protein, and water. A child who has enjoyed a huge portion of brightly colored, crunch, tasty broccoli is much less likely to gorge on ice cream afterwards. You don't have to forbid the ice cream, but you want to encourage the child to fill up on the healthy food first. If you follow this policy, over time your child will stop needing and wanting the sweet treats, or will at the very least eat much smaller portions of them.

When it comes to snack time, try a gentle approach. Offer a healthy snack first, such as a glass of milk and an apple. If your child has been used to eating a candy bar, and is still screaming for one, let them have a small one. Just get the good food in first! Over time the good food will become more acceptable and more important to your child. You will find some excellent snack ideas for all ages [here](#).

## **Gradually phase out the junk food**

If you manage to add good food to the family diet as suggested above, you will find that there is a decreasing need for junk food. You will have to plan your meals more, and perhaps buy ingredients more regularly. We tend to resort to junk food when we are at our busiest or laziest. Perhaps you can cook two quantities of a healthy meal when you are feeling strong, and freeze one quantity for those lazy moments!

Family outings are often an excuse for a visit to the local fast food chain, because it is cheap, convenient and quick. However, it doesn't take long to pack a backpack full of sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, and flasks of water, and young children in particular will probably prefer an impromptu picnic on occasion.

## **Watch the drinks**

The next time you visit the supermarket, walk down the aisle (or aisles) devoted to non-alcoholic drinks and study the proliferation of drinks aimed at kids, and the ingredients. Some claim to be designed for athletes. Some claim to be sugar free or low sugar, to protect kids' teeth. All are laden with chemicals and, if they don't have any added sugar, are certain to be full of chemical substitutes which could be damaging your child's health.

Instead of giving your child so-called "diet" or "light" drinks, try to phase out these chemical creations completely, or make them a very occasional treat. To begin with, give plenty of alternatives. Supply different varieties of fruit juice, cut half and half with water or fizzy water. Try some of the higher quality "organic" squashes on the market, or make your own lemonade. Most kids love drinking ice-cold water out of a sports bottle, so having plenty of cold bottles of water in the fridge and in satchels can help. Just putting it in bottles and then into the fridge makes it more important and appealing than drinking straight from the tap!

## Limit sedentary activities

Numerous studies have found a link between the weight of a child and the amount of time spent watching TV. This is no surprise. Try to reduce the amount of television your child watches by a small amount each week, perhaps introducing a short walk, some playtime outside, or even a family board or card game. To begin with you will need to find time to join in with your child. Could it be that they are watching television because you are involved with something else? Put down what you are doing and decide to spend 10 minutes, then 15 minutes, then 20, doing something fun with your kids instead.

## Become more physically active

Be active with your kids. See if you can find an activity – or a whole host of activities – which you can all enjoy. Write a big list of things you might like to try and places you might like to visit, and display it on the fridge. Play football or netball or basketball or tennis or squash or badminton. Go cycling, go swimming, go skating, go hiking, go bird watching! Try a bit of everything and you will find something that sticks. If the budget stretches to it you could invest in a mini-trampoline. Kids love them and they can be used outdoors in the summer and indoors in the winter. Set up an assault course. Build sandcastles on the beach. Skip. Run. Jump. Do anything! Print out our set of “Keeping Active” posters to give the family some ideas!

## Putting it all together

Don't expect an instant cure.

Don't make your child feel different or uncomfortable about their weight.

Don't ban any foods.

Involve the whole family in a healthy eating and fitness programme.

Try some subtle brainwashing techniques.

Think about and talk about what you are eating.

Watch your portions.

Trust your kids' appetites – they still have the ability to stop when they are full!

Get siblings to co-operate.

Put the emphasis on healthy eating.

Add in the good stuff.

Gradually phase out the bad stuff.

Watch what you are drinking – find alternatives to fizzy drinks.

Limit sedentary activities.

Go out and have some physical fun – the world is your oyster!.

