

A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Childhood Obesity in Early Childhood Programs

by Joyce Anderson

Involve staff, children, families, and community partners

Recent media coverage has bombarded us with statistics concerning the alarming rise of childhood obesity in this country. Since the 1980s, the number of overweight children in the United States has more than tripled! Obesity among children has reached epidemic levels. We now know that severely overweight children face a 70% likelihood of becoming obese adults and are at risk for numerous health problems including the early onset of Type 2 Diabetes, heart and kidney disease, high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, depression, and certain types of cancer (Brock, 2002; Swainson, 2000). These facts are disturbing!

As early childhood educators and advocates for children, we are daily witnesses to the difficulties that challenge overweight children. As our executive staff discussed the impact of the statistics and issues related to obesity, our Chief Operating Officer laid out a challenge before us to begin a comprehensive initiative to address this important, and timely, issue. We needed to take action! There was a lot we could do. We looked at these statistics from a different perspective; we have an opportunity before us to work together to make a difference in our children's lives. First, we made a number of observations about the children currently in our care:

- Children are in our care for more hours each day than ever before, as a result of their parents working longer hours and having extended commutes.
- Children are sharing more meals and snacks together and thus have more time to learn about nutrition and participate in physical exercise.

As early childhood educators we understand that young children's capacity for learning new skills and concepts is formed early. We knew we could create fun, age-appropriate learning experiences that would foster the development of these skills and change children's eating and fitness habits for life.

- We knew that parents were concerned about this issue and were interested in what their children were eating during their time at the center.
- We recognized that with this opportunity came a great deal of responsibility. Our initiative, if it were to be successful and effective, had to be well thought out. The strategies we developed needed to be implemented with full ownership by all the stakeholders, and they should be fully integrated into our programs on a consistent basis.
- We began our initiative by brainstorming about the ways we could make a difference in the lives of children and families at every level. We knew we had the power to prevent and cure this epidemic with children in our child care settings.

If your program decides to address this important issue, it will be most effective if it is developed within the context of a comprehensive approach. The following tips might assist you and your program in taking your first steps in working on this major health crisis affecting our children.

Getting started

Begin by identifying the issues related to childhood obesity. The National Center for Health Statistics (2000) tells us that childhood obesity is related to:

- Lack of physical activity (the #1 reason children become overweight)
- Poor eating habits

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- Lack of knowledge about how to make healthy food choices
- Lack of adult models who lead active lifestyles and have good eating habits
- Increase in the amount of time spent watching television or playing video games

Next, agree on a set of strategies. Everyone in the organization needs to feel a part of a comprehensive solution to this problem. Administrators, teachers, cooks, children, and families all can play a valuable role in brainstorming ideas and implementing strategies to assist children in all of the identified areas. Your initiative to address childhood obesity is more likely to be successful if all the players are committed to the same goals.

Teachers who model great habits are the best way to get children to make good choices.

Strategy #1:

Review and perhaps revamp your menus.

- Do your menus reflect the guidelines for healthy food choices in the *USDA Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children Ages 2- to 6-years-old* for both snacks and meals? Send for the latest revision of this valuable resource.
- Are whole grains incorporated in your breads and cereals?
- Have you eliminated transfatty acids from your menu items?
- Have you included the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables?
- Is drinking water available?
- Is the recommended number of dairy servings included in your menus?
- Are sugary snacks kept to a minimum?
- Do your menus reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of your families?
- Do children experience first-hand the variety of healthy food choices available?

Strategy #2:

Get your cook involved.

- Your cook can be a valuable asset in helping to adapt menu choices that are healthy and enjoyable for children.
- Your cook's attitude of optimism and pleasure in serving a well-prepared meal positively influences children's perceptions of healthy food choices.
- Encourage and implement family-style food service on a consistent basis. Family-style food service can

encourage more than social-emotional skills. In the relaxed atmosphere of "dining" with their teacher and fellow classmates, children are offered wonderful "teachable moments" that encourage healthy food choices and nutrition lessons.

■ Be aware that family-style food service requires more work in putting menu items in child-size bowls and usually more utensils to wash.

■ When cooks know and understand the needs of young children in relation to mealtime, it is easier to implement family-style food service.

It is always amazing to me when parents comment about the fact that their child never eats green beans at home but will at school. Teachers who model great habits are the best way to get children to make good choices.

Strategy #3:

Always have water available to children in the classroom and outdoors.

- Children and adults need water for good digestion and to maintain hydration of bodily fluids.
- Children also need water for healthy brain development during these early years.

Strategy #4:

Facilitate teacher planning.

- Teachers can design curriculum experiences to enrich the classroom environment, as well as integrate developmental skills and concepts into the learning activities.
- Set up mentoring teams with new teachers.
- With the help of parents and teachers, create prop boxes for healthy food choices and physical activities.
- Establish an area in your center where shared resources can be checked out to use in your classrooms.

Strategy #5:

Increase opportunities for children to be active.

- Integrate music and movement activities into your daily lesson plans.
- Offer movement activities indoors and outdoors.
- Schedule outdoor playtime at least twice per day.
- Encourage children playing outside to participate in active games.
- Present physical challenges to children using the playground equipment.



to 6-years-old to expand children's knowledge of nutrition.

- Read books about nutrition and fitness at Circle Time and have them available for children to read over and over again, giving them the opportunity to review the information presented by the teacher.
- Read classic children's books, such as *Stone Soup*, *The Carrot Seed*, and *Bread, Bread, Bread* in your classrooms.

■ Extend shared book reading

with curriculum activities such as matching, prediction, and sequencing activities.

- Have children "journal" their food choices with pictures and words.
- Feature healthy food choices in your Science Center. Design activities that encourage the children to describe the texture, predict the taste, and discover the tastes of a variety of foods. Use books to learn how our bodies use food.

Strategy # 9:

Share resources with families.

- Include helpful articles and pamphlets in a resource library.
- Encourage family fitness and fun by publicizing community resources such as recreation areas, gyms, parks, and walking trails.
- Create a lending library with books and videos related to health and fitness.
- Use family newsletters to keep parents informed about the activities happening at the center related to healthy food choices, physical fitness, and exercise. This will help to keep this initiative a priority.

Strategy # 10:

Secure funding to support your initiative.

- Partner with corporate sponsors and others dedicated to combating childhood obesity.
- Avail yourself of the resources of your local medical community.
- Compile testimonials from pediatricians endorsing your commitment to this important effort.
- Bring in guest speakers who are involved with issues related to health and fitness.

- Explore the wonders of your environment by going on a nature walk.
- Enroll in the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports if you serve children 6-17 years of age.

Strategy #6:

Eliminate the use of passive media (television and video viewing).

- Children should be highly engaged in fun learning activities that stimulate all developmental domains.
- Did you know that children on average watch more than two hours of television per day? When they do, they are more likely to be overweight.

Strategy #7:

Team up with families.

- Invite parents to share their favorite recipes and foods as one way to honor each child's culture at school.
- Ask parents to share their family traditions, including favorite dishes, to demonstrate how your program values the backgrounds of all children and families.
- Coordinate and schedule fun family activities related to fitness and exercise, such as community walks to raise awareness of childhood obesity, "Skate Night" at the local skating rink with all ages of children and adults, and family picnics with healthy food choices and games for children and adults.

Strategy # 8:

Integrate discussions about nutrition and fitness into the curriculum.

- Make an interactive matching game using the latest *USDA Food Guide Pyramid for Young Children Ages 2-*

As early childhood educators and advocates for children, we are daily witnesses to the difficulties that challenge overweight children.

Conclusion

As an advocate for young children, your commitment to addressing this issue is important. We have the power to make a real difference in the lives of children and families by integrating new information about nutrition and fitness into our teaching practices.

References

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- Swainson, R. (2000, August). *Facing the facts about childhood obesity*. University of Georgia Cobb County Extension Service.
- USDA. (2005). USDA Food Pyramid. [Online] Available: www.mypyramid.org

Resources

- **Kids Health** www.KidsHealth.org
- **National Dairy Council**, 10255 W. Higgins Road, Rosemont, Illinois, 60018

For more information

- Gavin, M. L., Dowshen, S. A., Izenberg, N. (2004). *Fit Kids: A practical guide to raising healthy and active children from birth to teens*. New York: KidsHealth.
- Rupnow, A. (2000, March). *Growing up fit: Preschool fitness activities*. Iowa State University, University Extension, Electronic version.

Children's books

- Brown, M. (1975). *Stone Soup*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dahl, R. (2001). *James and the Giant Peach*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Explore the issue of obesity: Convene a roundtable discussion about obesity to assess the impact it is having on children, families, and your community. Use the roundtable's conclusions to get started identifying action steps.

Kiss the cook!: Anderson points out the importance of getting the cook on board to support children and teachers in healthy eating. Appoint a small group that includes the cook, parents, and teachers to identify ways to incorporate the nutritional recommendations in the article.

All day long: Help teachers reflect on their role in supporting active play throughout the day. Begin by doing a baseline observation of how teachers support active play and good nutritional habits. Then, work with teachers to ratchet up the amount of both using the excellent ideas in the article.

It's on the www: Download the food pyramid and host a brainstorming party complete with healthy snack choices.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



**Menu for Preschool
& School-Age**
(Week Three)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
Whole grain cereal Bananas 2% milk	Waffles with light syrup Orange wedges 2% milk	Oatmeal Whole wheat toast Fruit jam 2% milk	Ham and cheese on English muffin Applesauce 2% milk	Cream of wheat Whole wheat toast Apple wedges 2% milk	Breakfast 7:30 a.m.
Oranges 100% juice Purified water	Cheese guppies 100% juice Purified water	Applesauce 100% juice Purified water	Fruited yogurt 100% juice Purified water	String cheese 100% juice Purified water	Snack 9:30 a.m.
Enchilada casserole Garden salad with light Ranch dressing Diced peaches* 2% milk	Chicken and whole grain rice casserole Cooked baby carrots Swirled pudding 2% milk	Baked fish shapes Green beans Whole wheat bread Orange wedges 2% milk	Macaroni and cheese Broccoli Melon mix 2% milk	Grilled cheese on whole wheat bread Tomato soup Pears* 2% milk	Lunch 11:30 a.m.
Granola bars 100% juice Purified water	Toasted bagels w/cream cheese 100% juice Purified water	Blueberry pan muffins 100% juice Purified water	Trail mix 100% juice Purified water	Apple wedges Graham crackers 100% juice Purified water	Snack 3:00 p.m.

*All canned fruits are packed in their natural juices.

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