

Parents can help stop the obesity epidemic, says psychologist

August 8 2009

Childhood obesity has quadrupled in the last 40 years, which may mean today's children become the first generation to have a shorter lifespan than their parents, a leading obesity expert told the American Psychological Association on Saturday.

However, parents can help stave off this impending crisis if they help their [children](#) to [eat](#) better and exercise, according to Edward Abramson, PhD. Abramson, professor emeritus at California State University-Chico, teaches psychology and is author of the books "Body Intelligence" and "Emotional Eating."

In the last decade, "we've seen a [tenfold] increase in Type-2 diabetes and psychological and social consequences, such as prejudice, rejection, discrimination and low self-esteem in children," Abramson said at APA's 117th Annual Convention. "More than 60 percent of [overweight children](#) have one risk factor for cardiovascular disease and 20 percent have two or more risk factors."

Bad eating habits can start with "emotional eating," or eating when one is not hungry, or from following a strict diet, Abramson said. "This can lead to a weight problem or an eating disorder," he added. "Parents' attitudes and behaviors also have an influence on children's eating, and mothers more than fathers affect children's eating habits and body image."

Many factors contribute to mothers' concern about their children's risk

for obesity, Abramson said. "For example, there is evidence that minority parents (e.g., African-American, Hispanic) are less concerned about their children's weight," he said. "Often, when a mother is struggling with her own weight, she becomes more involved in regulating her daughter's eating. In general, mothers are more concerned than fathers about their child's weight, especially their daughter's, and are more likely to restrict foods."

While everyone, including children, is entitled to have food preferences, infants are born with genetic predispositions toward sweet and salty tastes and against sour and bitter tastes and unfamiliar foods, Abramson said. "For these children, it may take several repetitions (10 or more) to have a child try a new food, but parents should retreat gracefully and try again another day rather than get into a battle of wills when the child refuses a food," he said.

Parents can increase the odds of getting a child to try a new food by having the child see them enjoying the food and having the child help prepare the unfamiliar food, said Abramson. "If the child is in the kitchen cooking with Mom or Dad, it's unlikely that he/she will refuse the food that they've helped prepare."

Physical activity can also help prevent obesity even when there is a tendency to gain weight due to genetics, Abramson said. Research has shown that 4- to 7-year-old children of active parents were six times as likely to be active. Exercise in school lowers the risk for obesity, whereas time spent watching TV or on the computer playing video games increases the risk.

Research has shown that most babies and toddlers start out liking their bodies, said Abramson. But this doesn't last for girls. By the time girls reach pre-adolescence, many start to suffer from warped body images. "Thirty percent of 9-year-old, 55 percent of 10-year-old and 65 percent

of 11-year-old girls think they're fat," he said. "Entering puberty isn't as bad for boys. They're more satisfied with their bodies than before they entered puberty."

Parents can help their children have a healthy body image, he said. They need to understand how they feel about their child's physique and see how that is influencing their behavior. With young children, they should let them choose the clothes they want to wear. With pre-adolescents, parents should talk about the body changes that happen during puberty. And finally, they should encourage their children to have friendships with other children who are less concerned with appearance.

Source: American Psychological Association ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Parents can help stop the obesity epidemic, says psychologist (2009, August 8) retrieved 2 May 2024 from

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