

Society can curb childhood obesity

■ **Don't put the burden on the children alone — the solution involves schools, advertisers and the community**

BY JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN AND ANNE MARTIN

One-third of American children have a serious weight problem. The potential health consequences of childhood obesity, such as type-2 diabetes, are harmful and costly. To the extent that obesity is accompanied by poor nutrition, children's cognitive development, irritability and attention span can all be affected, spilling over into their performance at school. But the social problems associated with obesity can be debilitating, too. Just ask a child who has been teased for being fat.

It's all food for thought, so to speak, during National School Lunch Week this week.

So who or what is to blame for this crisis? We all know that parents oversee their children's diet and exercise, and are thus ultimately responsible for their weight. But our society also makes all kinds of decisions that influence the rate of childhood obesity.

For example, one reason childhood obesity has increased in the past 20 years is that children spend more time

than they used to being sedentary. It's obvious that time spent in front of a screen watching TV, playing video games or using a computer is time that might instead be spent in active play. But more time in front of the TV also means greater exposure to advertising.

Studies show that the commercials children see influence the foods they prefer. Advertisers know this, which is why they target children's shows for junk food and fast-food restaurant commercials. And it's not just that children watch more TV than they used to. It's also that there are more commercials per hour of children's TV programming.

But not all parents can tell their children to turn off the TV and go outside to play. Low-income neighborhoods are less likely than affluent neighborhoods to have such recreational facilities as parks, sports fields, trails and gyms, and it's been shown that children's access to such facilities predicts their level of activity.



ILLUSTRATION BY FELIPE GALINDO

Furthermore, parents living in dangerous neighborhoods may not want their children playing outside. Intramural sports and sports clubs at school can provide an excellent opportunity for physical activity, but only half the schools in our nation reportedly offer such programs, and those that do typically don't provide transportation home for students who need it.

Families nationwide also vary greatly in their access to grocery stores that sell fresh produce, whole grains and low-fat dairy and meat products. Low-income parents are particularly likely to live in neighborhoods that lack such stores. These are the same neighborhoods that have a high concentration of fast-food chains.

The food children eat at home is only part of the story. The national School Lunch Program is overseen by the Department of Agriculture, and schools must meet certain nutrition standards to receive funding. By and large, school lunches are nutritious, but the most recent audit found that limits on fat content were not met by 80 percent of elementary schools.

In addition, cafeterias offer other food that is unregulated. More important, most schools today have snack bars or vending machines that sell junk food and soda. In fact, the revenue generated by these sales is often indispensable for schools facing budget crunches.

Unfortunately, children have been found to eat less healthy food when junk food is available. Consequently, many states and school districts have taken it upon themselves to limit the foods sold in schools. For example, New

York City public schools eliminated soda and junk food from vending machines on school grounds. Vending machines may now sell only water, low-fat snacks and 100 percent fruit juices.

So what can we parents do to stem the tide of child obesity? We can try to prepare more nutritious meals and insist on sufficient exercise — though in many cases this will involve the additional challenge of changing our own diet and exercise. We also can think about changes outside the scope of our own homes. We can demand that our elected representatives impose greater restrictions on advertising targeted to children. A few countries, such as Sweden and Norway, have simply banned commercials aimed at children.

We also can work with schools to think creatively about ways to promote healthier eating and exercise. Upstate, in Troy, a veggie mobile sells fresh produce out of a truck that drives around three days a week. At the Tooker Avenue Elementary School in West Babylon, children start each day with a seven-minute exercise routine.

Finally, we can advocate for the fairer distribution of resources and businesses across neighborhoods, rather than letting the marketplace decide for itself how to maximize profits.

A family can be encouraged by the community to pursue healthy habits, but it can just as easily be discouraged. The next time we see a fat child and wonder how the parents let the child get that way, we might instead wonder how the rest of us did, too.



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