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What You Can Do To Fight Childhood Obesity

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Overview

With nearly 33% of children in America considered to be overweight or obese – a rate that has tripled in adolescents and more than doubled in younger children since 1980 - an Obama Administration task force recently established a goal of reducing the childhood obesity rate to just 5% by 2030, less than a generation away. And while there have been many contributors to the growing rate of obesity over many decades, there are also many problem-solving strategies and tactics that can be implemented by individuals, families and communities *without government mandates or restriction of choices*.

Three common themes that can help meet the administration's goal can be found the following reports:

- The State Indicator Report on Physical Activity, 2010 (from the Department of Health and Human Services & The Center for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Small Choices, Big Bodies (from The Center for Consumer Freedom)
- Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation (from the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity Report to the President)

Education

Raising the awareness level of contributors to obesity is a good first step in correcting problem behaviors. Additionally, it is essential to understand the importance of regularly burning more calories than are consumed.

Reducing the amount of time spent watching TV (or in front of other screens, like computers) plays a large role in tackling obesity. One study found that by 2006, an average American spent more than two months a year (1672 hours) watching TV. Clearly this is idle and sedentary time that undermines the need to advanta-





geously burn calories. According to a different study, children with TVs in their bedrooms are 30% more likely to be obese than their peers.

Excellent medical care in preparing for the early years of a child's life is a key factor in reducing childhood obesity. Professional medical counseling that strongly discourages excessive weight gain and smoking during pregnancy, while encouraging breastfeeding, can have enormous benefits.

Becoming more knowledgeable about foods and the environments where they are consumed is also beneficial. Parents and caregivers are the first role models for children and need to exercise discipline when eating at home, in restaurants and other public areas. Nutritional improvements in school meals, food marketing and product labeling will all contribute positively.

Levels of Physical Activity

Restoring historical levels of physical education and recess in schools could have a dramatic impact on child obesity levels. Research from 1984 – 2003 indicates that students' enrollment in PE had fallen from 65% to 28%, and that 40% of elementary schools had eliminated recess. By some estimates, having as little as five hours of PE per week could reduce obesity risks by more than nine percent.

Encouraging physical activity outside of an immediate school environment is also critical. Children with access to parks, recreation centers and playgrounds not only enjoy the immediate benefits of play, but also develop an interest in other activities like biking, hiking, walking and running, along with an overall healthy lifestyle. As only 17% of students in grades 9 – 12 nationally report getting one hour of moderate – vigorous activity daily, there is certainly room for improvement.

While technology has provided many benefits and conveniences, it has also compromised and discouraged many health-conscious activities. NEAT (Non-Exercise Activity Thermogenesis) is a term that describes activities outside of eating, sleeping and formal exercise. Things like walking or biking to a nearby store (instead of driving) or using stairs instead of elevators whenever possible are examples of activities that promote good health and discourage obesity. In short, anyone can maximize their NEAT factor at nearly any time.





Community Involvement

Better community planning, with attention to interaction and synergy, will also promote activity and discourage obesity.

Urban sprawl, which took people away from cities and into suburbs through the 1900s, increased dependency on non-active travel between home and work. As urban centers are rejuvenated, and new mixed-use areas (residential/business/school) are developed, there are great opportunities to build communities that encourage interaction and activity.

Practical designs that include continuity of sidewalks and improved lighting will encourage walking and instill a sense of safety. The inclusion of bike lanes and walking paths not only increases physical activity, it discourages the selfish and often unnecessary use of costly and energy-dependent vehicles.

Conclusion

Given the current rate of obesity, it is encouraging to know that virtually anyone can participate in the movement to reverse this alarming trend and help achieve the country's health-minded goal by 2030. While government-provided information and guidelines are helpful, zealous and selfish legislation that restricts individual choices in restaurants and grocery stores can be counterproductive to the overall cause.

