



Get the healthy habit

Childhood obesity needs to be tackled by both diet and exercise. But this can be difficult for overweight youngsters. Experts offer some encouraging advice

By Adrienne Harebottle | Feature Writer

I know already, you don't have to tell me I'm a bad mother. Yes, this is all my fault. But my son is a great 12-year-old kid, and I'm trying to help him.

"I've cut out the snacks and started cooking healthier meals. I've also reduced TV time,

including video games, to a couple of hours a week. Despite this, his weight hasn't dropped; he's still 245 pounds. I'm at my wit's end. What can I do for him?"

At first, the answer to Sally Williams' question is simple: include exercise with what you're

already doing. The mother of two from the US knows about eating healthier and stopping the couch-potato pattern but what about being more active?

According to the guilt-ridden mother, who has lived in Abu Dhabi for the past two years, it's not so simple. Her son can't ride a bicycle, in-line skating or skateboarding is out of the question, and an understandable aversion to getting into a bathing suit rules out swimming.

"He's not agile and trying a new sport is very intimidating," says Williams. "It's physically uncomfortable for him but at his tender age, getting out in front of people is scary. You'd be surprised how nasty adults can be — it's not just his peers."

Difficulty taking up sports is a common

theme amongst parents of obese children in the UAE, with many saying that the country's extreme summers play a big role in establishing a sedentary lifestyle. According to numerous parents, unwittingly allowing your children to pile on weight is easy.

"After you move to Dubai, you're preoccupied with your job and settling in, and during the summer everyone is stuck indoors," says Steve Marsh, an Australian expatriate living in Dubai. "Your children aren't as active any more and you miss the amount of junk food they eat. Before you know it, your child has put on a substantial amount of weight and a lot of damage has been done. Bad eating patterns and a sluggish metabolism are difficult problems to tackle."

Long-term ill effects

No matter how big the challenge, parents must take action, say doctors. The long-term implications of childhood obesity include diabetes, hypertension and increased cholesterol levels, or a combination of all three diseases called metabolic syndrome.

"Most commonly we tend to see diseases of older age groups in these young obese children, where their bodies are definitely incapable of handling such problems," says Doctor Jessica Semoes, General Practitioner.

"Besides the cardiovascular issues that may develop, obese children can also have respiratory issues like asthma or they may have sleep apnoea syndrome, which is abnormal breathing whilst sleeping. Obesity also tends to hamper hormonal levels leading to early puberty and menstruation," adds Semoes.

Sympathising with Williams and the emotional challenges her son faces, the doctor explains that childhood obesity has a severe impact on one's mental wellbeing. "Unfortunately there are many dangerous implications of childhood obesity but more than the physical ailments, the emotional complications are often harder to cope with," she says.

"Obese children are mostly targeted and tend to be bullied by their peers. They can become two extremes; either socially withdrawn or they might act out to the extent of disrupting classrooms. This behaviour could lead to a child becoming clinically depressed and may require medication to control the depression."

According to the general practitioner, ▶

SET A GOOD EXAMPLE:
If you expect your child to be active, you need to be too. Exercise should be fun, not a punishment



various factors cause childhood obesity; it's not just lack of exercise and an improper dietary intake. "Genetics and medical illnesses are also factors," she adds. "However, the basic cause is that children tend to eat far more calories than they burn, or they might be eating the wrong kind of foods. Regular consumption of high-calorie foods that are high in sugars and fats are the main cause of weight gain. That combined with a sedentary lifestyle all lead to a downward spiral."

Buy and cook the right foods

Parents need to help their children, whether healthy or overweight, by stocking up on healthy foods, says Semoes, especially if parents are aware that their children are inactive.

"Parents play the biggest part in controlling the child's food intake. As long as parents buy the right foods, cook the right foods and ensure that meals are eaten in time, their children will be healthy," she says.

"Stay away from convenience foods and check labels to make sure you are buying the right foods. It's important to read the fine print and not the big 'wholemeal' or 'low fat' signs splashed across the packaging."

If you're unsure consult a dietician, advises the doctor. "They would be able to guide parents in exactly what are the best foods for their children and they would even help in creating food plans that could work for their lifestyle," says Semoes. "Physical activity needs to be introduced; it is critical for weight loss," notes Semoes, adding that exercise can be fun.

"If you expect a child to be active, parents



ZEST FOR LIFE: Ripe fresh fruits can satisfy the taste buds and are a far better option than refined sugars

need to be active along with them so they do not view the activity as a punishment. Not only does physical activity burn the required calories but it helps build strong bones and muscles, and helps children sleep better at night which in turn makes them more alert during the day."

Physical activity in the form of team sports encourages your child to socialise. "Find an activity that your child loves and steer them towards it. It's important to vary the activity but let them choose it." ■

Take a tip from the animal kingdom

Don't expect your children to eat healthily if you don't, says Alison Andrews, author of *Raw Food and Weight Loss Tips* among other titles. "In the animal kingdom, babies learn about what to eat and what to avoid by observing their mothers. Humans are the same," she says. "If you eat fruits and vegetables and enjoy them, your children will follow your example."

As fruit is often the first solid food that babies eat, parents are naturally off to a good start. If you've got young children, keep them eating fresh fruit and keep the refined sugar away. "Make sure your fruits are ripe. If you have delicious ripe fruits on hand and enjoy them yourself, there is no reason why your children won't do the same," says Andrews.

"There are many exciting things you can do with fruit. Fruit salads are great but you can also make some dessert options, such as ice cream," she adds. "Peel, quarter and freeze about five bananas overnight. Then place the quarters in a food processor with about a quarter cup of water and some carob or cocoa powder. Once blended, this comes out as an amazing ice cream. Add some dates for caramel chips or some cacao nibs for chocolate chip ice cream. You won't believe it's just made from bananas."

Visit www.loving-it-raw.com for more ideas.

— A.H.

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