

Childhood Obesity: Preventive Strategies

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### Abstract

Childhood obesity is a rapidly growing epidemic that is affecting the health of the nation. The increasing rates of obesity in these young children are leading to the development of chronic weight-related diseases. Like many other diseases, the best approach to reversing this trend lies in prevention. The following paper illustrates needed programs and policy changes that can help in the fight against obesity.

### Childhood Obesity: Preventive Strategies

Childhood obesity rates are rising dramatically locally, statewide, and throughout the nation. Currently, almost one in every three children in our nation is overweight or obese which predisposes them to chronic diseases (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). These numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic Communities. Between 1980 and 2004, the prevalence of obesity in children increased from 6.5 percent to 18.8 percent and experts predict that by 2020, approximately 15 million U.S. children will be considered obese (Spectrum Health, 2010). It is also predicted that, at the current rate, a third to half of the children born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will become diabetics (Spectrum Health, 2010). Obese children suffer from medical complications that were once only common in adults, such as: diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, joint problems, sleep apnea, metabolic syndrome, and high cholesterol. Poor diet and lack of physical activity is now considered the second leading cause of preventable death, behind tobacco use, in the United States (Spectrum Health, 2010). Dr. Tom Peterson, MD of Helen Devos Children's Hospital states that "for the first time in history children are expected to have a shorter lifespan than their parents due to complications from obesity".

These facts are extremely unsettling and it very clear that changes must be made on many levels if we are to reverse these trends. Children deserve a long, quality life and advances in technology such as video games, increased fat and sugar content in diets, and lack of physical activity are making it very difficult for children have the life they deserve. The key to reversing or slowing the increasing rates of childhood obesity lies in developing policies aimed at prevention on all levels; locally, statewide, and nationally. Focusing on preventing disease and illness before they occur will create healthier homes, workplaces, schools, and communities so

people can live long and productive lives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Policies aimed at prevention on the local level should include programs that focus on improving nutrition and physical activity within schools and educational programs for families within the community. Policy changes within the school should incorporate healthy lunches and snacks and include the elimination of unhealthy choices in vending machines. Physical education should be included in the daily curriculum requiring all children to participate in some form of physical activity on a daily basis. Health education should also be part of the curriculum for all students from the time they begin school because healthy habits must be developed early in life. Children must be taught, in age-appropriate ways, the importance of eating a healthy diet and the consequences of unhealthy habits so that they can make good choices when they are not in school.

The community also has a very important role in supporting the health of its children. Prevention should be woven into all aspects of life, including where and how one lives, works, learns, and plays (U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2011). Everyone has a role in creating a healthier nation; businesses, educators, health care institutions, government, and communities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2011). Helen Devos Children's Hospital of Grand Rapids, Michigan recognizes the important role they have in the prevention and treatment of childhood obesity. In April 2010 the Helen Devos Children's Hospital Healthy Weight Center was opened to address these issues (Spectrum Health, 2010). This program allows patients and families to work with a multidisciplinary team of physicians, dietitians, exercise physiologists, social workers, and psychologists. Dr. Bill Stratbucker, pediatrician and medical director of the Healthy Weight Center, states "the role of a children's hospital in the

prevention and treatment of pediatric obesity is becoming increasingly clear as the epidemic progresses” (Spectrum Health, 2010).

State health departments are in a unique position to offer resources and support for local obesity prevention efforts (Cousins et al., 2011). A strategic policy agenda was designed and led by the Michigan Department of Community Health and Education to reduce childhood obesity in the state by promoting physical activity and healthy food choices (State of Michigan, 2009). The program, Healthy Kids, Healthy Michigan project workgroup, was designed with a five-year plan to fight childhood obesity (State of Michigan, 2009). Some of the recommendations to be addressed in the workgroup include: incorporating safe routes to school for bicyclists and pedestrians, coordinating school health programs, improving access to fresh, healthy foods at retailers in underserved areas, changes in recess policies, school breakfast expansion, and school garden programs (State of Michigan, 2009).

Policies on the national level can have a huge impact on reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity. The National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy is a comprehensive plan developed to help increase the number of Americans who are healthy at every stage of life, recognizing that good health comes not only from receiving quality medical care but from stopping disease before it starts (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). This strategy provides evidence-based recommendations to help improve the nation’s health through the active engagement of all areas of society to help achieve the following four goals: 1) building healthy and safe communities; 2) expanding quality preventive services in both clinical and community settings; 3) empowering people to make healthy choices; and 4) eliminating health disparities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Another program, on the national level, that is aimed at improving the health of children is the First Lady's Let's Move initiative. First Lady Michelle Obama launched the Let's Move campaign in 2010, calling for comprehensive, collaborative, and community-oriented solutions to the childhood obesity epidemic (Cousins et al., 2011). These national programs can provide a basis for policy changes locally within the community and within the schools to help children live healthier lives and decrease the rates of obesity.

Policy changes, at any level, do not occur without opposition. New policies and programs cost money. In these times of recession, many communities and schools are already struggling with budget cuts and may balk at the idea of implementing more programs. However, in the long run, obesity in childhood is far more costly than any preventative measure. Dr. Tom Peterson of Helen Devos Children's Hospital explains that, "with one-third of children in America overweight, the impact on health and health care costs is just beginning to unfold" (Spectrum Health, 2010). In 2008, about \$147 billion of medical bills were weight-related (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Policy changes, aimed at prevention, within schools and in the community could actually help, in the long run, to reduce these weight-related medical costs.

Reversing the rising rates of childhood obesity must start with policy changes and program implementation aimed at prevention. The current rates of childhood obesity should be viewed as a tragic epidemic, one that needs immediate addressing. The evidence is clear that children with better health grow into healthy adults. Children with better health are in school more days and are better able to learn (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Studies also show that regular physical activity in children supports better learning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Whether the policy changes occur at the

local, state, or national level, they all positively impact the health of the children in the community.

## References

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