

Fighting Childhood Obesity

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Friday, 02 April 2010 14:03

When First Lady Michelle Obama decided to launch the "Let's Move" campaign to fight childhood obesity, she brought much needed attention to a crisis facing millions of children. It's a special concern for children of color because new research shows Black and Hispanic children are disproportionately at risk for nearly a dozen factors that increase their chances to be obese. But children of color are far from the only ones in danger. Experts estimate one-third of American children are currently overweight or obese, and these rates have tripled among children ages 12 to 19 since 1980. Some adults may see a heavy child as a sign of a healthy eater, or think that for children, extra weight is mainly just a cosmetic issue. But serious risks for overweight children go far beyond appearance.

Diseases once associated only with adults, like type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure, are on the rise at younger and younger ages. Overweight children are at greatly increased risk of being overweight adults, so for many children, this may be more than just a "chubby" phase they'll someday outgrow. As many as 80% of overweight children may be set up for a lifetime of increased health risks that come with being overweight. The most pressing risk, cardiovascular disease, remains the leading killer in America. If childhood obesity trends continue, experts predict they could cut two to five years off the lifespan of the average child in America—making this the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Right now our country spends \$150 billion a year treating obesity-related diseases—nearly 10 percent of all medical spending. Many experts label the current level of childhood obesity an epidemic that threatens our future national health, productivity, and security unless something can be done to stop and reverse the trend.

There are many reasons childhood obesity is on the rise. American children have been immersed in the same "supersized" culture that snares adults, surrounded by high-calorie, high-fat food that's plentiful, cheap, and often served in unrealistically big portions. And today's children and teenagers are much less likely than past generations to spend free time running around outdoors and much more likely to spend it on the couch watching TV, playing video games, or surfing the Web, often with snacks and sodas right next to them. Very few children get the 60 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week recommended by the Surgeon General.

Even schools have become part of the problem. Many districts have cut back on gym time and recess, often as a tradeoff for more instructional time to prepare for state testing. The quality of school meals and easy availability of snacks and sugary drinks in many school vending machines were some of the first targets in the war on child obesity, and there's been progress. Some major school food suppliers are making improvements in response to Mrs. Obama's campaign. Advocates for better nutrition hope that as more people become aware of the risks to children's health, more industries, schools, restaurants, and communities will make a big difference for America's children.

As these kinds of changes occur in a range of child environments, Michelle Obama and others stress the biggest influence in children's eating habits will come from home. It has been parents who have told their children to eat their vegetables or go outside and get some fresh air. Mrs. Obama has shared some of the simple changes she and the President have made in their own family's lifestyle, including watching portion sizes, packing more fruits and water in their daughters' lunches, limiting TV time, and, famously, starting a vegetable garden at home. We

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know our beautiful children come in all shapes and sizes. But by being aware of the serious health risks many overweight children face and of the long-term value of a balanced diet, and of regular exercise for all children, we can help make sure all our children grow up to be as healthy as possible. Making healthy food and exercise part of family life is the right place to start, and will be good for many adults too! Teaching good habits to children early can have lifelong consequences, and someday our children—and grandchildren—will thank us.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.