

Understanding the Causes of Childhood Obesity

Getting our kids off to the best start in life

As owner of Kids Exercise, Sue Cutbill is increasingly dealing with kids showing early signs of obesity, and she wants to do something about it!

Moving to Australia from the UK 6 years ago with 2 sickly young boys was when her passion for being active and healthy eating began. Due to the congenital kidney defects of her 2 older sons, Sue always made sure the boys only ate and drank healthily. It was this, combined with access to the great Australian outdoors, which turned the boys' health around. Although they will always have regular hospital checks, her whole family's quality of life have skyrocketed because of their healthier way of life.

We asked her to share her insights into childhood obesity.

Obesity and being overweight are complex issues, but put simply putting on weight is an imbalance between what goes in, and how much we do to burn it off.

Research shows that 1 in 4 Australian school-aged children are overweight or obese. Being overweight and obesity is a massive problem in Australia. Parents play a key role in the management of childhood weight problems and obesity. Early identification and management of weight problems and obesity in childhood is more likely to prevent long term weight and health problems. The best way to deal with this problem is to prevent it happening in the first place, secondly if it has happened, early treatment and strategies to deal with weight problems is essential.

One of the problems today is our perception of what the weight of an average child should be has increased. It can be difficult for parents to objectively look at their child and work out whether they are carrying too much weight or not.



helping our children with the changes to eat more healthily, and to incorporate more activity into their lives, is making it fun. In dealing with a child who is overweight, it's best to emphasise getting fit rather than emphasising weight. It is also important to be a good role model, show that you are supporting your child, get the whole family involved, it will do everyone a lot of good.

Regular physical activity is a priority for children, overweight or not, and dietary changes alone will not be enough to help a child lose weight. Regular physical activity does not necessarily mean organised sport. There are lots of ways to include physical exercise into your child's life, and it's important to be realistic if you are going to be successful. Make the goals achievable – life is busy and you need to be able to include it as part of **your** routine.

I'm not for a minute saying that making changes is easy, but it's important, for the long-term health of your overweight child, that you put some time into helping them make changes to their daily routines.

Ideas to get your children moving:

- Encourage your child to be active before they sit down and do their homework.
- Have skipping robes, balls, bats etc easily accessible.
- Encourage bike riding, skate boarding, scootering.
- If possible and practical, walk to and from school a couple of days a week.
- Go for a walk as a family over the weekends or in the evenings.
- A trampoline is a great form of exercise, if you don't have a yard big enough for one, try and get a mini exercise one, you can get them very inexpensively second hand.
- Have days where the television does not go on after school.

Some simple changes to make to your child's diet:

- Limit or stop access to fizzy drinks and juices, both of which are full of sugar. One bottle of fizzy drink can have up to nine teaspoons of sugar.
- Never use food as a reward – especially junk food like chips, sweets, donuts etc.
- Cut down or stop pre-packaged snacks – offer a piece of fruit or a sandwich – lots of the snacks available are full of fat and sugar.
- Try and cut down on take-away, pre-packaged food and don't let your children snack while they are watching TV.
- Use multi-grain or wholemeal bread.
- Encourage your child to eat fruit and vegetables – be persistent.
- Remove the skin on chicken before eating, trim fat off meat.
- Make sure your children do not skip meals, especially breakfast – this slows down the metabolism.

When offering food choices, make sure the choices you're giving are balanced. Don't offer a packet of chips **or** a piece of fruit – a burger **or** a ham and salad sandwich. Often the less nutritious item is the first choice for kids! Make sure your choices are balanced e.g. a ham sandwich **or** a piece of fruit.

The more nutritious the foods your child consumes, the more satisfied they will be, for longer. If you have a meal of junk-food, your body will crave more food to try and get the nutrition it needs, if you then eat more junk-food, the cycle goes on and on, so your child ends up consuming a lot of empty calories.

In summary, if you have a child that fits into the overweight or obese category:

1. Get them checked over by a G.P who will work out your child's BMI (body mass index).
2. If you are unable to motivate your child or find the time to get them active, find a fun kids fitness group – it's a great motivator when there are others doing the same thing.
3. Keep a log for 2 weeks of everything they eat and drink.
4. Start by cutting out the fizzy drinks and fruit juices (freshly squeezed at home is fine).
5. Drink water – start the morning routine with a large glass of water with breakfast, make sure they go off to school with a good sized water bottle.
6. Cut out pre-packaged snacks – or check their fat and sugar content.
7. Make sure that fruit and vegetables are included in their daily diet – if your child doesn't like fruit and vegetables, just keep presenting them, it sometimes takes 8 – 10 presentations before children will try them, and their bodies really do need them.
8. Keep a check on portion sizes.
9. Don't let your child eat in front of the television, they do not concentrate on the eating and therefore tend to over eat.
10. Start looking at food labels, there is many foods marketed to kids as being healthy and are far from it.
11. Ask for help, you are not alone. The process of change can be very daunting and can be made easier by talking about it.

Always remember a child of a healthy weight is much more likely to be happier, and carry good exercise and eating patterns into teenage years.

Sue is Director of Kids Exercise – a qualified Personal Trainer and can be contacted at www.kidzexercise.com.au