

## Health Matters

by Garey V. Ellis, M.D.

### Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is becoming an epidemic in the United States today. Nearly one out of every three children is overweight or obese; seventy percent of these children will grow up into obese adults. The number of overweight children in the United States has increased dramatically in recent years. Almost 8 percent of 4 and 5 year old children are overweight, nearly double that of 20 years ago. Overweight is more prevalent in girls than in boys and in older preschoolers (ages 4-5) than younger ones (ages 2-3).

Obesity increases even more as children get older. Among children from ages 6 to 11, at least one child in five is overweight. Over the last two decades, this number has increased by more than 50 percent and the number of "extremely" overweight children has nearly doubled.

Obesity is an underlying cause of a number of serious medical conditions including Type II diabetes, essential hypertension, respiratory disease, heart disease, gallbladder disease, stroke and osteoarthritis. These conditions are beginning to show up at increasingly high rates among children who are overweight. According to Dr. Howard J. Eisenson, M.D., director of the Duke Diet and Fitness Center, children are "... actually developing Type II diabetes earlier, in some cases in their teen-age years." He adds that "researchers are predicting that, instead of seeing heart disease happening in their 50s and 60s, our kids might be subject to heart disease as early as their 20s..."

Obese children are not only at risk physically but emotionally as well.

The social implications of obesity rob children of self-confidence and self-esteem. The cruel treatment that overweight children experience in school, in social activities, and on the playground can cause emotional scars that will stay with them for life.

While genes play a role in childhood obesity, genetics alone cannot account for the alarming rise in obesity rates over the past few decades. For most children - as for most adults -overweight is the result of unhealthy eating patterns: too many calories and too little physical activity. The American Obesity Association (AOA) found that nearly 30% of parents say their children eat less nutritiously than they did during their own childhood and are significantly less active.

The most important strategies that families and schools can use to prevent obesity in children are those that promote lifestyle changes. Promoting healthy eating behaviors - portion control, "real meals" and healthful snacks - as well as regular physical activity are preventative strategies that should be developed during early childhood.

Developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle from early childhood on will improve a child's quality of life and result in a decrease in the many risk factors that are associated with childhood obesity.



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### **-Do not get involved in your children's disputes -**

Children need to learn to resolve their own conflicts

### **-Reward appropriate behavior -**

Don't just become involved when there is a problem among your children. Recognize and reward the good things that they do for one another.

### **-Seek professional help -**

If your children are fighting all the time and the fighting is out of control - if it is endangering the physical well-being or self-esteem of any member of the family, don't hesitate to consult a professional psychologist or counselor.

Sibling rivalry is not all bad. Think of it as a learning experience. Learning to deal with sibling rivalry teaches your children valuable social skills. It teaches them to control their negative impulses, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to see the value of another person's perspective, to compromise and negotiate. Sibling rivalry prepares children for the competition they will face later in their lives.

Best of all, as your children watch how you handle their squabbles justly and calmly, they are accumulating valuable parenting skills that they will be able to use when they themselves become parents.

## RESOURCES

### Books for Parents

Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

Beyond Sibling Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Become Cooperative, Caring and Compassionate, by Peter Goldenthal

Raising Children to Care, by Miriam Adahan

### Books for Children

I Love You the Purplest, by Barbara Jooose Ages 4-9. *Two brothers compete for their mom's attention and love. She shows them she loves them for their special selves.*

Queen of the World, by Thomas Yezerski. Ages 4-9. *A realistic portrayal of three sisters' rivalries in a loving family.*

Too Big, Too Little, Just Right, by Loren Hodes Preschool. *Racheli learns that the best thing in life is to be exactly what you are...yourself!*

Big Like Me: A New Baby Story, by Ruth Finkelstein *When Mommy comes home with a new baby girl, Benny turns into a big brother.*

