



PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

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Feed with Love

Helping Parents Win the Battle Against Overweight



In my 20-plus years working with families who have overweight children, I've made some interesting observations of what helps and what doesn't. Following are three simple suggestions you can pass on to parents—eat healthy yourself, allow your little ones some control over their diet, and make quality time a high priority.

Eat Healthy Yourself

It's important that parents pay attention to their own eating habits, as example is the most powerful teacher. To get on the road to healthy eating, take grocery shopping seriously, as that's where good nutrition starts. Working parents can shop on their lunch hour, using a well-thought-out list to get in and out in record time. Office refrigerators can store perishables until the end of the day. Try online grocery shopping for bulk, non-perishable items. To avoid battles between parent and child for junk food or candy, enlist the help of family and friends—trade shopping trips without the kids. Whatever it takes, stock healthy foods in your home.¹

Healthcare providers can help by asking parents if they would like to learn more about healthy eating. Sometimes education is the only thing standing between healthy and unhealthy habits. The nurse or nurse practitioner in your office may schedule a visit specifically to address this concern. Engage family members in sharing their ideas. Draw up a "Key Advice Statement" about what parents can do at home and plan for a follow up to add accountability and motivation.²

Allow Your Child to Self-Regulate

Help parents remember that developmentally, children may go up and down in weight, and too much focus on pounds can have an undesirable effect. Studies have shown that controlling behaviors actually increase a child's risk of overweight—even with infants who are breastfeeding. Instead, relax, enjoy mealtimes, and watch for your child's hunger and satiety cues.

Most young babies and toddlers will instinctively cease intake when they are satisfied unless they're upset, worried, or have had to respond to Mom or Dad saying, "Stop, you've had enough." Creating an atmosphere of enjoyable mealtimes and pursuing physical activity together will go a long way toward helping the child respond to his own inner sense

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of fullness. As Dr. Farrow recommends in this issue, more implicit rather than explicit use of control may be helpful—for example, limiting the availability of fatty foods rather than explicitly forbidding them, or offering the child choices of more calorie-dense foods rather than forcing these alternatives.

Spend Quality Time

Numerous studies have shown a strong association between overweight and feelings such as anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem in children.³ Although schedules can be tight, especially if both parents work, increasing quality time with your child can help keep him emotionally satisfied and less likely to turn to food for comfort. Creative ideas are out there—for example, "Saturdays," set up by Batley SureStart in West Yorkshire, provides a child-friendly forum where dads can spend quality time with their young children. "I'm at work all the time," says father Altaf Daji, 40, "so it's good getting quality time with the kids. A lot of parents get old and think they should have spent more time with their children before."

Health Supervision Summary

There's no question that childhood obesity is a difficult issue for pediatricians. You may already be doing some of these things, but to give families every chance of raising healthy children, here's a brief review of the most important steps.

Track families at risk—assess for activity, food variety, excess in fat, sugar, and calories. Calculate and plot BMI once a year on all family members, encourage breastfeeding and the child's autonomy in self-regulation of food intake, and monitor risk factors for adult chronic disease such as blood pressure, hyperlipidemia, hyperinsulinemia, glucose, and sleep apnea. Suggest family activity, smart grocery shopping and limited TV-watching. Set one measurable goal and follow up in one-two months. Finally, give simple tips to avoid overwhelming parents. Patience will likely show these efforts to be successful if both parents and caregivers are dedicated and willing to take small steps toward a better future.⁷ •

Tips To Share with Parents^{5,6}

- **Model healthy behaviors**— establish regular family meals and snack times, and choose nutritious foods at the store and the restaurant.
- **Keep the TV off**—researchers recommend that children under 2 years of age do not watch TV.
- **Encourage play**—throw a ball, tumble with the child on the floor, dance, pretend, go to the park and play. Be active as a family.
- **Learn the recommended servings for different foods**—parents often give toddlers adult-size servings.
- **Learn about nutrition**—nutrition knowledge has been positively associated with children's fruit and vegetable intake.
- **Encourage your child's self-regulation of food intake.** Let her make some of her own choices, and choose her own serving sizes.
- **Take grocery shopping seriously.** Make a list of healthy foods and stick with it. If it's difficult to take your child with you, leave him with a babysitter or family member.

Dr. Kathy James has over 20 years of experience working with overweight families in private practice and in school settings. She recently published *Dr. Kathy's Health and Weight Loss Guide* based on family questions.

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