

5 Keys to Helping Kids Avoid Obesity

There is nothing I enjoy more than raising my four children, but I have found it to be a challenge to raise healthy-weight children in today's society. With the tripling of the child obesity rate in our country, there are record numbers of children experiencing health problems that a generation ago were primarily observed in adults.

As a physician's assistant in family medicine, my job is not only to treat patients for their various health problems, but also to educate patients on ways to prevent diseases.

Lifestyle changes can be challenging, but when I took a successful child obesity intervention and prevention program that I had implemented in my community, the "Family Fitness Challenge," and brought it to my church, I found that by combining current medical research about behaviors associated with obesity along with Bible verses to meditate on, it further inspired parents to make changes in their household that had a huge impact on the health of their entire family.

While there are multiple contributors to the child obesity epidemic, here are five areas that parents need to pay the most attention to:

1. Sleep. Research shows that people who regularly sleep too little and at the wrong time suffer long-lasting consequences: an increase in obesity and risk of diabetes, heart disease and other health problems. American children are the most sleep-deprived in the world. Children should get 10 to 12 hours of sleep at night, teenagers eight to nine, and adults eight.

"Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience" (Heb. 4:11, NIV).

2. Eat enough produce. The recommendations for the servings of produce came out when it was discovered that five servings was the minimum daily amount that was needed to reduce heart disease, cancers and obesity. According to the American Heart Association, the cardiovascular health of today's youth is foreshadowing bad news for their adult years and the future of our country's public health, after a survey found that less than 1 percent of teenagers in America met this ideal dietary goal.

"At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead" (Dan. 1:15-16).

3. Limit media time. Of all the areas I speak to patients about, our society's excessive amount of time spent on media is the habit that poses the greatest challenge. Most parents underestimate the amount of time their kids spend on media. Current data reveals that U.S. children spend an average of 7.5 hours a day staring at screens. This screen time is affecting their physical activity, slowing their metabolism, interfering with their sleep cycles, exposing them to toxic advertising, and taking over time that could be spent interacting with family, friends, honing their artistic skills or growing their spiritual life. It is recommended that children limit screen time to two hours or less a day. With the excess time that children and adults are spending on screens, their hearts and minds are being continuously bombarded with the material and sometimes corrupt values of the world.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8).

4. Get enough physical activity. According to a recent study, Americans are spending eight hours a day barely moving. Couch-potato adults are now raising couch-potato children. With physical activity no longer being scheduled into our daily lives, our society is experiencing the negative health consequences that accompany it. The Bible talks about when Mary and Joseph had the job of raising Jesus and how he “grew in wisdom and stature,” meaning they looked out for his intellectual health as well as his physical health.

It is recommended that children get at least one hour of exercise a day. As a working mother of four, I find this advice to be impractical—at the end of the day, I have no idea how much time each of my children have spent exercising. I needed a watchdog to make sure my kids are getting the exercise they need. My easy solution has been to invest in pedometers for everyone in my family. By having our brood wear pedometers, I can ensure that my children (and their parents) get the minimum of 10,000 steps recommended daily.

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

5. Drink more water. Soda and other sugary drinks are the No. 1 source of calories in many Americans’ diets and the food item most commonly linked to weight problems. The average American gets an extra 300 calories a day in the form of liquids. By replacing liquid calories with water, it is possible to see a dramatic impact on weight problems in a short period of time.

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38).

J’nelle Ruscetti is a physician’s assistant in family medicine and the mother of four children. She started a child obesity intervention/prevention program in her community called the

"Family Fitness Challenge." She recently released her book of the same name.