

Parents Can Help Overweight Children by the American Institute for Cancer Research

Although two-thirds of U.S. adults are overweight, excess weight is no longer exclusively an adult problem. The percentage of American children aged 6 to 11 who are overweight is 15 percent. This percentage has doubled since the early 1970s. New research shows that overweight children can have more success at losing weight if treatment is focused on their parents.

An Example Children Follow

Parents shape an environment that either supports or deters healthy behaviors in their children. In a recent, eight-year study of obese children between the ages of 6 to 11, parents influenced children's eating, exercise and weight at all ages.

The children were divided into two groups. After one year, children whose parents received counseling reduced their weight by 14.6 percent. In the other group, the children received the counseling. After a year, those children decreased their weight by 8.4 percent.

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A year later, children in the parent-centered group regained a little weight, but were still under their beginning weight. Children in the other group were right back where they started.

Eight years after the beginning of the study, children in both groups had healthier weights. But children who received the parent-focused treatment reduced their weight by 29 percent, while others lost only 20 percent. In the former group, 60 percent escaped obesity, while in the latter group, only 31 percent succeeded in changing their weight status that much.

Making the Change

Parents influence children in several ways. First, parents have an enormous impact as models of healthy or unhealthy eating and exercise habits. Parents who ignore good nutrition have a negative influence, as well as parents who cycle on and off diets.

Second, parents serve a key role as providers. As "gate keepers", parents determine if vegetables and fruits are a major part of meals, or if healthy, low-fat foods are available for snacks.

Third, parents are "enforcers". Being authoritative without dominating children is the key to fostering healthy eating habits. Research demonstrates that too over-controlling a parental style, like telling children when they have had enough to eat, creates long-term problems. Children need to use internal hunger signals to regulate their eating and avoid a future of overeating.

Fourth, parents help children maintain a healthy weight by being their advocates and unconditional supporters. Parents should insist that school officials offer healthy food choices and opportunities for physical activity. Parents must also safeguard their children's self-esteem by emphasizing that weight is a health concern, not a measure of worth.

Lastly, teaching children how to cook healthy meals prepares them for a lifetime of good eating. For useful kitchen advice and good recipes to show children how to put together nutritious meals, order AICR's free brochure *Homemade for Health*. The phone number is (800) 843-8114, ext. 110.