As soon as they get off the bus, the school-age children charge toward the Xbox®. An argument breaks out over who will play first. Eventually six children gather and stare at a screen filled with lizard-looking creatures that are attacking a small planet. Ms. Janie reminds the children that their homework must be completed before they can play video games. She then serves snack packs of butter-coated popcorn and chocolate chip cookies.

This scenario is not uncommon in after-school and preschool programs, especially when the weather does not permit outdoor activities. Children appear to be content while playing computer or video games. Although the use of computers and other learning tools can be beneficial to children, excessive amounts of sedentary behaviors may have negative consequences such as less social interaction and increased snacking. Such activities may contribute to long-term health problems.

Children in the United States are less active and more overweight today than at any time in history, and there has been a dramatic increase in obesity (Crespo & Arbesman, 2003). Obesity can lead to physical and psychological health issues such as these.

- Obese children are at risk for heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes (United States Centers for Disease Control, 2005).
- Obese children are at risk for serious medical ailments such as sleep apnea, high blood pressure, orthopedic complications, insulin resistance, and Type 2 diabetes (Greaser & Whyte, 2004).
- Incidences of mental health problems, such as low self-esteem, negative body image, increased stress levels, and poor socialization ability (Lundy, 2003) have also been found as a consequence of childhood obesity.

These medical ailments have an economic impact. The total cost of overweight and obesity in 2000 by some estimates was $117 billion, with $61 billion direct and $56 billion indirect costs (Wellman & Friedberg, 2002, p. S706).

Many adults recognize the health issues that can stem from childhood obesity, but may not be aware of the clear implication of the social consequences including discrimination and bullying that may directly result from this disease.

Cynthia G. Simpson, Jon P. Gray, Staci Waldrep, and Mark D. Gaus

How can communities of families, teachers, and children become healthier and fit? The five steps recommended here offer concrete ways to offer more nutritious foods and increase physical activities for children and those who care for them.

Healthier Lifestyles for Young Children: Partnering With Families

As soon as they get off the bus, the school-age children charge toward the Xbox®. An argument breaks out over who will play first. Eventually six children gather and stare at a screen filled with lizard-looking creatures that are attacking a small planet. Ms. Janie reminds the children that their homework must be completed before they can play video games. She then serves snack packs of butter-coated popcorn and chocolate chip cookies.

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Emotional suffering may be among the most painful aspects of obesity. American society emphasizes physical appearance and often equates attractiveness with slimness, especially for women. These consequences may be devastating to overweight people. Many think that obese individuals are gluttonous, lazy, or both, even though this is not true. As a result, obese people often face prejudice or discrimination in the job market, at school, and in social situations. Feelings of rejection, shame, or depression are common. (Wellman & Friedberg, 2002, p. S706)

Researchers have found a direct link to bullying and overweight and/or obese school-aged children. “Overweight and obese children are more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of bullying behaviors than their normal-weight peers. These tendencies may hinder the short- and long-term social and psychological development of overweight and obese youth” (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004, pp. 1191-1192).

Model Healthy Living

Collaboration among community members, schools, faith-based organizations, and educators can focus on creation of healthy living and learning environments for young children. Adults can work together to learn about, and implement, ways to engage children in healthy lifestyles. Schools can actively assist adults to be more involved and better educated on the causes, consequences, and prevention of obesity (VanStaveren & Dale, 2004). Everyone can promote healthy food choices and regular physical activity. Adults are children’s role models, so teaching positive lifestyle choices by example can greatly influence children’s behaviors. Children see the choices adults make each day regarding physical fitness and nutrition. Adults can teach by example by “actively supporting nutrition and physical activity, supporting meal programs and encouraging students to participate, providing constant messages about healthy eating and physical activity, and modeling the same healthy behaviors that they want our students to adopt” (Minnesota Department of Children, Families, & Learning, 2002).

During the past 3 decades, childhood obesity rates have more than doubled for children ages 3 to 5 and have more than tripled for children ages 6 to 11 years. In 2004, approximately 9 million children older than age 6 were considered to be obese (Institute of Medicine, 2004). Most experts agree that “attention should be given to prevention and the development of preventive strategies at all ages” (Kiess, et al., 2001, p. 35). This article outlines five steps that educators can take to help children and their families adopt healthier lifestyles.

Many health issues can stem from childhood obesity.

Table of Web Sites

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<td>Minnesota Department of Education Food and Nutrition <a href="http://education.state.mn.us/mde">http://education.state.mn.us/mde</a></td>
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Contradictory messages can be sent to children and their families, such as serving high-calorie snacks at events and fundraising with cookie dough, candy, or other high-fat or sugar-laden foods. Schools have switched to selling fruit baskets, toys, and magazines, for example, as part of their fundraising. Free resources on becoming better role models for children can be found on the Minnesota Department of Education Food and Nutrition Web site (see sidebar).
Share Information

Adults can promote healthy family lifestyles by sharing information with each other about nutrition, including the United States Department of Agriculture’s recommended daily dietary requirements as illustrated in the food guide known as MyPyramid.

Families and teachers are encouraged to share information about children’s development, physical activity, and nutrition in a variety of ways.

- Newsletters or program Web sites can include information regarding upcoming physical activity events, information from parents regarding extracurricular activities, as well as details about local community programs such as YMCA or faith-based sports groups.
- Take photos and/or post family pictures of active children—at field day, cup-stacking events, dance classes, and splash day—in their classrooms, newsletters, and Web sites.
- Adults and children can create personalized physical activity portfolios together. Parents supply pictures and other information. Teachers plan a time for families to gather to scrapbook and share their portfolios.
- Maintain lists of current events and information about meeting children’s health needs. Post details on bulletin boards or Web sites for easy access by families and educators.

Understand the Food Pyramid

Serving as a healthy role model for children extends far beyond making good choices. Agencies that regulate and monitor child care facilities must develop policies on specific nutritional requirements during meal and snack times. This includes training staff about nutritional guidelines. The Food Pyramid developed by the United States Department of Agriculture can be used to promote healthier eating habits at both home and school. Educational information on supporting healthy eating and physical activity for children and adults can be found on the USDA’s Team Nutrition site.

Adults who use this information can learn about nutrition and find ways to put the knowledge into practice when preparing and providing food to children.

- MyPyramid recommends lean cuts of meat that are seldom, if ever, fried. A grilled chicken breast is far healthier than nuggets.
- Water and milk are better choices than sodas and sugary drinks.
- More nutritious food choices include fresh fruits and foods made with whole grains. Serving turkey sandwiches on whole wheat bread along with carrot sticks is a healthier choice than serving bologna on white bread with potato chips.

MyPyramid emphasizes physical activity as an important part of being healthy. It recommends that adults should be physically active for
30 minutes most days of the week and that children and teenagers should be physically active for 60 minutes every day.

**Help Children Eat Healthier**

When all adults involved in children’s lives act as partners, they can strengthen each other’s efforts to help children to lead healthy lifestyles. Children are more likely to see good nutrition and regular physical activity as natural routines. Partnerships may also encourage adults to help each other to maintain or achieve a healthy body. Six simple guidelines can help everyone lead more healthy lifestyles.

1. **Eat a nutritious diet that contains adequate calories, vitamins, and minerals.** Well-balanced food plans provide children with necessary nutrients for their optimum growth and development. A diet that simply restricts calories may interfere with a child’s natural growth process. Children who are undernourished or who take in insufficient calories have been found to be at risk cognitively (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001). If it is important to lower dietary fat, children can still maintain their calories by increasing complex carbohydrates such as fruits, vegetables, cereals, breads, pasta, and potatoes.

2. **Model healthy living by eating nutritious foods and being physically active along with children.** Even young children can be involved in family menu planning and active family outings. Family programs that promote physical activity and sound nutritional intake have been found to be useful in improving the movement

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**Six Guidelines to Healthier Eating**

1. Eat a nutritious diet that contains adequate calories, vitamins, and minerals.
2. Model healthy living by eating nutritious foods and being physically active along with children.
3. Encourage and model eating at a leisurely pace.
4. Plan healthy snacks throughout the day as well as regularly scheduled meals.
5. Limit the intake of sweets.
6. Eat a nutritious breakfast every day.
patterns and nutritional behaviors of families (Hopper, Munoz, Gruber, & Nguyen, 2005).

3. Encourage and model eating at a leisurely pace. Eating slowly allows people to thoroughly taste and enjoy their food and to recognize the feeling of fullness. High-speed eating can be a risk factor leading to obesity among preschool children (He, Ding, Fong, & Karlberg, 2000). Friendly conversation at meals among adults and children can add to the enjoyment of the eating experience as well as help slow the pace of eating.

4. Plan healthy snacks throughout the day as well as regularly scheduled meals. Regularly scheduled, nutritious meals can be supplemented with healthy snacks. Snacking has increased in frequency from the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s, so the daily caloric intake from snacking has increased (Jahns, Siega-Riz, & Popkin, 2001). Snacks should be nutritious options that contribute to a balanced, healthy eating plan rather than adding empty calories.

5. Limit the intake of sweets. Adults and children alike can reduce their intake of highly processed sugar and fats in snacks and desserts by eating naturally sweet fruits and vegetables, for example. It is important for all ages to reduce the intake of high-calorie, nutrient-poor foods (Ritchie, Welk, Styne, Gerstein, & Crawford, 2005). Focus on the intrinsic rewards such as pride in children’s accomplishments, rather than offering food, stickers, or other tangible items.

6. Eat a nutritious breakfast every day. These are just a few examples of healthier breakfasts: whole wheat toast with low-fat cottage cheese, skim milk with reduced-sugar cereal, scrambled egg whites, and using fresh fruit to sweeten cereals and oatmeal instead of honey and sugar.

Increase Physical Activity

The key in developing a strong partnership among families, children, and educators is to assure that every-one plays a critical role in encouraging physical activity at all ages. Children learn from adult behaviors. Adults have to be physically active role models and healthy eaters if they are to have credibility with children.

Young children learn either that physical activity is a critical aspect of health and well-being or that physical activity plays only a small part in healthy lifestyles. The fun of interactions among parents and children often enhances everyone’s desire to participate in physical activity. When the whole family is involved, children may not think of the activity as simply exercise. Rather, it becomes a pleasant activity.
physical-psychological learning experience for children (Casey, 2002).

This also holds true in the educator-child relationship. Early childhood programs with strong commitments to healthy lifestyles often work with families of very young children to advocate for stronger activity programs in their community. These programs may refer to Guidelines for School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). Everyone in the community can increase their activity, as well as their fun, so physical exercise becomes a lifelong habit.

What else can families and educators do to increase physical activities? Some families and programs set time limits for sedentary activities such as television or video games. Instead, they offer children choices of a range of fun, more active options. When children choose the experiences they find most enjoyable, they feel more in control of their lives. Families of school-age children can encourage safe opportunities for children to be active by promoting participation in youth sports, YMCA programs, and other community-related experiences.

Infants, toddlers, and preschool children who are provided the opportunity to have daily movement and exercise have a higher likelihood of healthy development in later life (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2002). The NASPE publication “Active Start: A Statement of Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years” is available online. In addition, NASPE developed Kids in Action, a brochure that provides adults with simple ideas for physical activities that they can

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**Children's Books About Nutrition and Physical Activity**

- *D.W. the Picky Eater* by Marc Brown
- *Eat Healthy; Feel Great* by William Sears
- *Eating the Alphabet* by Lois Ehlert
- *Good Enough to Eat: A Kid’s Guide to Food and Nutrition* by Lizzy Rockwell
- *Gregory the Terrible Eater* by Mitchell Sharmat
- *Healthy Me: Fun Ways to Develop Good Health and Safety Habits: Activities for Children 5-8* by Michelle O’Brien-Palmer
- *Janice VanCleave’s Food and Nutrition for Every Kid: Easy Activities That Make Learning Science Fun* by Janice VanCleave
- *Showdown at the Food Pyramid* by Rex Barron
- *Spriggles Motivational Books for Children: Activity & Exercise* by Jeff Gottlieb
- *The Edible Pyramid: Good Eating Every Day* by Loreen Leedy
- *The Race Against Junk Food* by Anthony Buono

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**Resources on Nutrition and Physical Activity**

- *American Heart Association* Fitting in Fitness: Hundreds of Simple Ways to Put More Physical Activity Into Your Life from the American Heart Association
- Brown Bag Success: Making Healthy Lunches Your Kids Won’t Trade by Sandra K. Nissenberg
- *Feeding Your Child for Lifelong Health: Birth Through Age Six* by Susan Roberts, Melvin Heyman, & Lisa Tracy
- *Fit Kids! The Complete Shape-Up Program From Birth Through High School* by Kenneth H. Cooper, MD
- *Healthy Lunch Box: The Working Mom’s Guide to Keeping You and Your Kids Trim* by Rallie McAllister
- *How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much* by Ellyn Satter
- *How to Teach Nutrition to Kids* by Connie Lakos Evers
- *Janice VanCleave’s Food and Nutrition for Every Kid: Easy Activities That Make Learning Science Fun* by Janice VanCleave
- *Mom, I Feel Fat! Becoming Your Daughters Ally in Developing a Healthy Body Image* by Sharon Hersh
- *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Helping Preschool Children Become Healthy and Fit* by Dianne Lawler-Prince & Jim L. Stillwell
- *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family* by Ellyn Satter, Karen Foget, Paulette Sharkey, & Mary Worley
- *Super-Sized Kids: How to Rescue Your Child From the Obesity Threat* by Walt Larimore, Sherri Flynt, & Steve Halliday
- *The Right Moves: A Girl’s Guide to Getting Fit and Feeling Good* by Tina Schwager, Michele Schuerger, & Elizabeth Verdicke
- *Your Child’s Fitness: Practical Advice for Parents* by Susan Kalish & Ronald Melvin Lawrence
do with young children to adopt an active lifestyle early and positively influence their physical, intellectual, and emotional development. It is also available on the NASPE Web site.

Obesity is a major, preventable public health problem in the United States. Creating partnerships among families, child care programs, and the public schools can lead adults and children to live and eat healthier. The key to improved overall health is to make physical activity a part of everyone’s daily routine and eating more nutritious meals and snacks. Families and early childhood educators can help ensure a healthier future for children.

References


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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Healthier Lifestyles for Young Children:
Partnering With Families

by Cynthia G. Simpson, Jon P. Gray, Staci Waldrep, and Mark D. Gaus

5 Steps Adults Can Take to Help Children Adopt Healthier Lifestyles

- Model healthy living
- Understand the Food Pyramid
- Increase physical activity
- Share information
- Help children eat healthier

Enrichment Experiences for Young Children

Embed games and activities revolving around making healthy choices into the curriculum. During transition times, circle times, and outdoor play, feature more active learning experiences. Elementary teachers often incorporate healthy living concepts into physical education, health, social studies, and science.

Learning centers for all ages can include real objects that represent healthy food choices, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, and menus from restaurants that offer nutritious selections to encourage dramatic play.

Food preparation for snacks and meals is an excellent way for children to learn to follow directions, observe changes in the properties of matter, and understand basic mathematical principles. Select nutritious foods for these experiences.

Choose playground equipment to assure that young children are challenged to improve their skills as they run, jump, pedal, and climb. Structured opportunities during outdoor play, including games such as freeze tag and kick ball, may be appropriate for school-age children.

Nutritious Snacks for Young Children

- Cinnamon apples
- Applesauce
- Trail mixes
- Banana freeze pops
- Juice pops
- Fruit salads
- Ants on a log (celery with peanut butter or low-fat cream cheese topped with dried fruit)

Adult Learning Experiences

- Share information from this article at in-service programs and workshops.
- Ask early childhood experts on physical activity to demonstrate age-appropriate physical activities for young children.
- Find out what to look for before making referrals of children who may have delayed motor performance.
- Work with nutrition experts to plan and prepare more nutritious snacks and meals.
- Together, plan how families and teachers can establish a positive, warm, and active learning environment for young children.

Six Guidelines to Healthier Eating

1. Eat a nutritious diet that contains adequate calories, vitamins, and minerals.
2. Model healthy living by eating nutritious foods and being physically active along with children.
3. Encourage and model eating at a leisurely pace.
4. Plan healthy snacks throughout the day as well as regularly scheduled meals.
5. Limit the intake of sweets.
6. Eat a nutritious breakfast every day.

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.