

Extra kilograms not only put kids at risk of illness like diabetes, heart disease, and asthma but also negative self-image and alienation. Henry Lew, psychologist, shows you how to take the weight off gradually, without hurting your child's self-esteem.

Overweight and obese children often do not share about their real feelings when they are teased, bullied, excluded and alienated by their peers. Behind their cheerful smiles and jokes, may lurk low self-esteem, negative body image, and, possibly, depression.

If your child or anyone you know is overweight, there are some things that can be done to help them achieve physical and mental health.

The very first step to helping children who are overweight is to really understand childhood obesity and dispel some of the notions we have about it that might be interfering with how we can help them.

Some of us think that childhood obesity is genetic and nothing can be done. While genetics only make some children more prone to gaining weight, that does not mean they will definitely be overweight or always overweight.

Most kids can maintain a healthy weight if they eat right and exercise. Some of us may think that children will just outgrow their weight, that when they reach puberty or when their physical activity levels increase or when they are faced with more stress from studying, their weight will naturally do down.

While childhood obesity does not always lead to obesity in adulthood, most kids do not outgrow the problem. Action needs to be taken to help them manage their weight.

LIGHTENING THE LOAD

In taking action to help children with obesity, here are some points to note:

- **Focus on encouraging them to try out new behaviours they may be good at or interested in.** Some of these new behaviours may be related to weight management in some ways like increasing their physical activity in general (e.g., walking to the store two blocks away instead of taking a ride from you). Some of these new behaviours may not be directly related to weight management. They may be encouraged to take up new activities/hobbies like inline skating, dancing, soccer or even non-physical activities such as drawing or making aeroplane models. These non-physical activities provide healthy alternative forms of spending their time, and help them break away from computer games or watching television that may encourage unhealthy snacking. It could give them a sense of achievement and help them feel good about themselves. Focusing on their weight, shape, exercise or diet may cause more distress and put undue pressure on them. Chances are, they are already very self-conscious and do not feel very good about their weight and shape and themselves.
- **Praise them for their efforts.** They most probably know what they need to achieve. And people around them may have already been harping on them what they need to do (e.g., whether they have lost weight, whether they have started out a new behaviour). Acknowledging their efforts helps them to feel recognised, stay motivated and comforts them that though they may not have achieved any visible outcomes, they have made progress.

The most effective way to influence your child is through you. If your children see you physically active and eating a healthy diet, and physically there's a good chance that they will do the same.

Start with small steps to lead by example in some of the following ways. It may just help you to achieve your desired weight as well!

- **Choose healthier food options** whether you are eating out or dining in. Your children may not want to change their diet immediately but over time they might start to wonder what is so nice about the healthier food you are eating and may be curious to try.
- **Be physically active.** Nope, this is not just about exercise. In your daily life, instead of driving across the street to pick up your newspaper, model for your kids by taking a walk.
- **Don't ban unhealthy food entirely.** Having no sweets, fried food or chocolates entirely is an invitation for cravings and overindulging when given the chance. Moreover, you may end up in a tug of war over whether they can or cannot eat it. Allow them their "comfort" food but negotiate how much or how frequent they can have it.

In addition, there are other ways to help your children manage their weight:

- **Help them learn to pay attention to their hunger cues and what a regular portion size looks like.** The portion sizes that restaurants serve us nowadays are equivalent to two or three servings in some places. This may send the signal that we eat based on the amount we are served and not based on how hungry we are. Hence, we may be cultivating in our kids overeating even when we are full. What we could do is to downsize our order, share our order, or portion out food on smaller dishes. .
- **Stop eating in front of the TV.** Eating in front of the television encourages mindless eating, as we pay less attention to how much we are eating and how full we are feeling.

These behavioural strategies take time and it will be best to tailor and implement them gradually. And it is always in the best interest of your child who is overweight or obese to visit a physician for further assessment and to help you and your child come up with a comprehensive plan to manage his weight.