



We begin a new regular column on the lighter side of eating well. Kohila Govindaraju, a freelance nutritionist and mother of a teenager with a great passion for education, hopes to be able to reach out to parents and children to help them make better lifestyle choices.

## A Parent's Place in Preventing Childhood Obesity

Food convenience, large intake of sodas and juices, decreased physical activity, and a hurried lifestyle – these have not been very helpful in keeping the number of obese children down. It may seem strange, but some parents do not even realise their children are overweight. While a child's weight is printed in his school report book, it appears to be the least important number to a parent. If only children were graded on their health as well! Then perhaps parents might take their children's weight a little more seriously.

Experts suggest that successful intervention and prevention of childhood obesity starts at home. In my experience with families, parents, rather than their children, are the main agent of change. Taking an active role and educating children about health and fitness, parents can help develop positive family habits that enable everyone to get and stay fit. They have a strong influence on their children's lifestyles, mostly through modelling and education. They are the ones who can provide a healthy array of food at regularly scheduled opportunities. They are the ones in charge of what, how and how much their children eat every day.

Parents can play a major role in reversing the trend of obesity in children just by following various strategies.

### COOKOUTS AT HOME!

For starters, cooking at home as much as possible is a step in the right direction. This way, the composition of the meal is known and can be adjusted for weight control. Preparing a meal at home allows parents to control the kinds and quantity of fats, sugar, salt used. It can also be a fun family affair. School-aged children love to cook and experiment! Cooking demonstrations at home can be a fun way to learn about portions and moderation. Children also love assisting in the grocery shopping, looking for ingredients, reading labels, checking prices, etc. Get them to make a list, and help to carry the groceries for physical activity!

According to researchers at the University of Missouri, "children who watch more television and eat fewer family meals are more likely to be overweight." Whenever possible, eat family meals and try to minimise television viewing. Family dining will help the parents to catch up with the children on

what is going on in their lives. Children who eat meals with their families eat more healthy foods than children who do not eat as many meals with their families. Eating family meals together will result in children having more green vegetables, and fruits and other key nutrients.

After dinner, take a family walk or play an outdoor game together at weekends not just for physical health but also for healthy family bonding, emotionally and socially.

### SLOW AND STEADY

Keep mealtimes as relaxed as possible. Eating at a leisurely pace allows time for the digestive tract and brain to sense satiety. Rapid intake of calories is associated with excess weight gain and may lead to increased obesity risk. Encourage children to quench their thirst with water instead of soft drinks and juices that are high in sugar to reduce the calorie excess that contributes to obesity.

### HAVE A SNACK

Who says you cannot snack? In addition to regular meals, children do need snacks – nutritious ones, of course. Steering kids toward snacks that are not calorie dense, like fruit, vegetables, non-fat or low-fat dairy products, will improve their diet and help limit excessive caloric intake. This might help children make better choices when they eat their mid-day meal in school during recess.

It worries me a little to see what children eat in school. With no one to check on their choices, they usually go for foods that are high in salt and drinks that are high in sugar. It is a good thing that schools have limited the kinds of foods that can be sold in canteens. Still, it would be wise to inculcate positive eating habits at home before they are let loose into the world!

### References:

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