

Childhood obesity – Blazer editorial May 2012

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The area of childhood obesity is complex which is why I am going to write about it over the next few editions. It is vital as we know that overweight children face serious health problems even before they reach adulthood. We are not currently winning as a nation with this problem, despite a multitude of local and national initiatives.

We don't like the words 'fat' or 'obese'. We choose to call our overweight children 'well built', 'big boned', 'heavy' or 'chunky', denying what they really are. Little children don't know any better but as children reach school age and progress through the years, they doubt the 'pet names' we give them, and realise that they are what they are – which is overweight...fat...obese. How do they know? Because, generally, children of any shape are bright enough to look around them. They listen to what other children say, which is often truthful but not always 'kind', and they compare themselves to their peers.

Being an overweight child, or worse still an overweight teenager, with family who avoid the issue is a desperately lonely place to be. You're on your own. Overweight and isolated. You know things aren't right, and you don't want to be the way you are, but you have no idea where to start or what to do, as no-one else is acknowledging or tackling the problem. Miserable, fat, 'stuck' children and teenagers then do what they have always done to make themselves feel better, which is to eat. So the problem escalates... But that's a separate issue for the next editorial. It is however important to set the scene of the isolated overweight child lacking active support from parents who believe they are being kind by turning a blind eye.

We need to get one thing straight at the beginning. Obesity is very rarely a question of 'glands' or 'genetics'. It is all about habit, including habits set at a very young age by parents for their tiny children. Some families have 'high metabolic rates'. Look at those individuals though and you pretty much always see the same thing. People who walk fast, act fast, think fast, talk fast. A 'hyper' individual. In other words, someone who is constantly expending energy and being very active in their everyday life, and constantly burning off their calorie intake. If that is not you, and thank heavens it is not everyone, you simply cannot eat as much as they do.

I see weight management as having three main areas to think about. First is **Food**. It is essentially fuel with a bit of 'treat' thrown in. Second is **Activity**. Those who expend more energy need more fuel. Third is the **Psychology** or understanding of how our thoughts about food influence our children's, and the formation of unhealthy food habits. I'll cover this last area in another editorial as it is the most complex one.

All three areas have to be considered when helping a child to lose weight, or at least grow into the weight they have.

Let's start with Food. There is a raft of information out there about healthy eating. So why do we still get it wrong? Firstly, do you know what is in your children's food? Buying ready meals and 'healthy snacks' (that are often far from healthy) is a sure way to include a lot of unnecessary sugar, fat and salt in children's diets. If you cook for your kids, you know what goes in their meals. Secondly, imagine your children's plates as a 'cake' (poor analogy!) cut into slices. Some slices are large relating to the amount of fruit and vegetables or complex carbohydrates taking up space on the plate; some are medium sized and relate to protein such as fish, meat and pulses, or to milk and dairy products, the latter valuable sources of calcium for growing children. The final small slice of cake is exactly that – a small space for cake, biscuits, crisps, chocolate and other treats etc that shouldn't routinely belong in kitchen store cupboards at home acting as a constant source of temptation, but are better bought as needed. Your children cannot eat them if you do not buy them. (*Look at www.eatwell.gov.uk and put 'eatwell plate' in to the search engine for a download that you can stick on your fridge*). Thirdly, portion size is crucial. Kids need smaller platefuls than adults! Fourthly, children should not need to eat between meals if they are eating properly. Snacking is mostly habit, prevents the gut getting the rest it needs and prevents children eating properly at mealtimes. You're not a bad parent if you ask your children to wait a little while if they say that they're hungry. You're actually teaching some early but necessary self control. Fifth, ensure your children are not mistaking thirst for hunger. A big drink of water often does the trick.

What about Activity? Children who are overweight move slowly. It's not laziness; it's hard work for them to move quickly because they are heavy, get tired more easily and get puffed out. So, they tend to give up quickly and do as little as possible which means that they don't actually stretch themselves to actually need much of the fuel that they eat. That fuel then simply becomes more fat. These children need a regular activity that makes them get puffed out, red in the face and sets their heart racing, an activity that can be gradually escalated to stretch them further, with multiple small goals, and multiple opportunities to say, 'Well done!' and highlight their achievement. Steps may be small but as long as they are in the right direction, it doesn't matter. Please don't reward activity with more food though!

Food is one of the great joys of life but for many adults, food is an uncomfortable friend; they love it, sometimes obsessively, but they hate what it does to their bodies and health. Wouldn't it be great if we taught our children to enjoy food in a relaxed, non-obsessive way, knowing what and when they need to eat to stay well?