

## Childhood Obesity

Jackie Schrader

### Introduction

We are currently seeing an increased incidence of childhood overweight and obesity. The National Center for Health Statistics states that over the past three decades obesity in youth has tripled. When children are overweight, they have a high risk for serious chronic diseases throughout adulthood. To combat this health issue, we must educate our youth and promote healthy lifestyle choices. Obesity is related to the lack of a nutritious diet and physical exercise.

### Reasons for the Increase in Obesity

There could be many reasons for this overweight epidemic. Child characteristics play an important role such as age, gender, dietary intake, and genetic predisposition. Also, we must look at the activity level of the child. Does he or she have a rather sedentary behavior?

Family characteristics play an important role. Parent weight status, parent food preferences, dietary intake, and nutritional knowledge will affect what the child eats. Since parents are usually the primary food purchasers in the home, they influence what foods are available and feeding practices. When both parents work outside of the home, meals tend to be skipped, centered around convenience foods or consumed very late in the day.

Community and societal characteristics will influence eating habits and patterns of children. Neighborhoods with high crime rates are not safe. In this situation, children may not be permitted to be outside where they could engage in physical exercise. It might be that recreational facilities are not easily accessible. There may be convenience

stores very close which are tempting for unhealthy eating habits and frequent snacks. Schools in bad neighborhoods may not have physical education programs.

Ellyn Satter, MS, RD, DCSW with Penn State University states parents are responsible for what is presented and the manner in which it is presented. Children are responsible for how much and whether they eat.

### Healthy Tips for Families

Here are a few tips for adults with young children to make mealtime a bit more pleasant and successful. These will also encourage a healthier attitude toward food.

- Provide meals and snacks at regular times.
- Provide a variety of healthy choices and children will choose healthy.
- Eat with children and model healthy habits.
- Let children eat as much or as little as they want of foods offered, within reason.
- Encourage: don't bribe or negotiate.
- Repeatedly offer new foods.
- Accept that a child may not like some foods.
- Remain calm at mealtimes.

