

Social influences on childhood obesity

[Life](#), [Childhood](#)



Overweight and obese children are a major problem in the United States and the rates are unfortunately rising, especially in children. Obesity is the leading cause for health problems such as type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, gallstones, depression, anxiety, poor academic performance, and many other long-term health problems especially if obesity occurs early in life. I believe this is a social issue because the major causes of obesity are diet and lifestyle.

In America, the diet consists of fried and greasy foods such as fast foods, the lifestyle lacks enough physical activities that are necessary to increase the metabolism and prevent weight gain that leads to obesity. The children of the United States spend much more time watching TV or playing video games than doing activities that include physical exercise, such as sports, running, hiking, biking, or even just walking. Obesity in children in America is a problem.

The sociological factors that cause obesity in children include sociocultural evolution and built environments, especially the advancement of technology, and social control which includes media, advertisements, and peer-pressure. More than one in five children between the ages of 6 and 17 are now considered overweight. The issue of obesity is related to the obvious factor of over eating and also the lack of physical activity. American families over feed their children without realizing it because they want to make sure their children are not hungry or starving.

Our bodies adjust their need and requirement of food based on the amount we regularly eat, therefore over feeding children in their early years

increases their need for food throughout their lifetime. Food and over eating can become an addiction, which leads to obesity and many health problems. “ If the definition of addiction is the habitual use or uncontrollable craving for something, then we (Americans) are addicted to food. Food is the drug of preference in this country. ” (Freeman-Fobbs 2003: 95). Other factors also contribute to childhood obesity. Family demographics, parenting beliefs and practices, child television watching and physical activity have all evidenced associations with behaviors that can lead to early obesity. ” (Gable and Lutz, 2000: 49). Sociocultural evolution is a factor that contributes to childhood obesity because of the drastic increase in technology or material resources that are replaced with physical activity. Another sociological concept is social control; parents conform or go along with the social norms which could be certain behaviors or beliefs that contribute to lifestyles leading to obesity in children.

The built environment in today’s American society, children have an abundant amount variety of video games and television shows to choose from for their entertainment. The built environment can both facilitate and hinder physical activity and healthful eating. Sociocultural evolution refers to the changes that human society undergoes over time by developing new means that are used to fulfill necessities and wishes. All the material resources that are available cause the children to stay indoors most of the time and therefore limit physical activities, such as sports or other outdoors activities.

Research shows that spending one hour per day in front of the television or playing video games may double the child’s risk for obesity. Screen time is

widely blamed for the tripling of obesity rates in children since the 1980s. According to the Surgeon General, in 1999 13% of children aged 6 to 11 years and 14% of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years in the United States were overweight; this prevalence has nearly tripled for adolescents in the past 2 decades, the same time period in which technology has greatly advanced. Technology gives rise to a sedentary lifestyle not only indoor but even in outdoor activities. Children today seem less likely to walk to school and to be traveling more in cars than they were during the early 1970s, perhaps because of changes in the built environment; children also spend more time viewing television and using computers. " (Anderson and Butcher, 2006: 16) Parents drive children to school instead of letting them walk; kids ride motorized cars and scooters rather than pedal bikes; teens manipulate a joystick instead of a baseball bat. One may argue that technology provides value, convenience and entertainment, but it should be utilized in moderation and definitely not take the place of movement and active play.

Another sociological factor that contributes to childhood obesity is social control. Social control is the society's attempt to regulate people's thoughts and behaviors. Parents are usually guilty of giving in or conforming to certain behaviors that put their children at risk for obesity. For example, a parent might be aware of the fact that video games create an unhealthy sedentary lifestyle. If the child insists that he or she needs those games because all their friends have them as well; the parent is very likely to give in to this peer pressure and buy the video games.

These parents don't want to be different from other parents, or they don't want to be thought of as 'bad parents' because they don't buy their kids these 'cool games' that all the other kids have. Eating unhealthy foods such as fast-foods and a lot of sugars is another factor that leads to childhood obesity. This is also an issue of social control, since the foods that people see as easily available in this country such as fast-food and pre-prepared foods are highly promoted socially via the media.

School lunch programs also fail to provide healthy and nutritious foods for children, and many children prefer to buy lunch at school rather than have lunch packed at home, because they might be seen as different if they don't eat the same thing that all the other kids are eating. Changes in the family, particularly an increase in dual-career or single-parent working families have also increased the demand for food away from home or pre-prepared foods, which can lead to obesity in children.

Advertisements for these foods air often during television shows which children watch often, making the children crave and request that their parents get them these foods. Social control regarding the foods that our children eat is therefore manifested in many different ways, with media and peer-pressure being the biggest factors. Childhood obesity is greatly influenced by sociological factors and it must be prevented to avoid illnesses that can become critical in childhood and have damaging effects the rest of one's life. The sociological factors that cause obesity in children include sociocultural evolution and built environments.

These are all very complex sociocultural issues that can sometimes be hard to identify by people who are caught up in everyday life routines. Therefore, there is no simple solution to preventing and ending childhood obesity; it takes a lot of effort and major lifestyle changes for the entire family; for example, cooking more meals at home, using organic foods which can be more expensive sometimes, limiting sweets especially for children, limiting screen time, and increasing outdoor physical activities. Making these changes usually takes a lot of hard work and persistence.

Kids may refuse to eat healthier foods and be more active, especially if they are in their middle or late childhood years. Writing this paper has made me even more aware of how the society plays such a big role in the issue of obesity in children. Before writing this paper I would have said that the number one factor leading to obesity in children is bad parenting, but after analyzing all the sociocultural issues I can say that our society and lifestyle are the number one factor. Parents do play a major role by the way they raise their children. The statistics are very sad in terms of how rapidly this issue is increasing in this country.