

Childhood obesity: the factors that play a part

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While many can agree that youth are the leaders for tomorrow, it would not seem that they are being treated that way when parents, educators, and government's approach the health of youth. A traditional African proverb says, " it takes a village to raise a child". This means that a child has the best opportunities when everyone in the community plays a role in providing and caring for the child with regards to the health of a child, parents, caregivers, educators, and the government all play roles in the healthy upbringing of a child. Childhood obesity is an epidemic that is creating many additional health problems for obese children in North America. A child is obese when their weight is above the normal weight for their height and age. While children who are obese are more likely to encounter health-related limitations, they are also more likely to stay obese into adulthood as well as develop diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases such as high blood pressure, aneurysms, heart attack and stroke (Sahoo, 2015). While unhealthy eating patterns, lack of exercise, and family customs all play a role in childhood obesity, it can be treated and prevented through implementing physical activity and healthy eating at schools and in homes. Of all the causes of childhood obesity, unhealthy eating patterns play the largest role in the onset of childhood obesity.

Throughout the course of their childhood, children are constantly growing and developing. Their growth and development is supported through having a healthy diet that includes many vitamins, protein, and minerals like calcium and iron as well as getting plenty of physical activity. While their growth and development is at its peak when they are young, studies have shown that children are most likely to become obese between 5 and 6 years

old (Obesity in Children and Teens, 2016). Many do not know what they should be eating and how much of it they should be eating but nutrition specialist Wanda Koszewski suggests that children between the ages of 4-8 should be eating 5 ounces of grains, 1 ½ cups of vegetables, 1-1 ½ cups of fruit, 4 ounces of protein, and 2 ½ cups of dairy (2012). Economic status plays a big role in a family's diet. Families that are on a strict budget or perhaps do not even have the means to purchase food and rely on the Food Bank, are often not able to consume the healthier foods and families that have more money to spend on food are able to buy the more expensive foods like fruit, vegetables, and meats. A study conducted by the founder of Johns Hopkins Global Center on the subject of Childhood Obesity, found that adolescents that come from a low income family are more likely to face being overweight or obese than an adolescent coming from a high income family (Wang, 2001). Healthier foods filled with iron, calcium, and vitamins like lean meats, dairy, fruit, and vegetables are often more expensive than foods high in carbohydrates, sugars, and fats like pasta, chips, cookies, and instant meals. This can be solved through government programs that lower the costs of healthy foods for families that cannot afford them as well as educating them on the negative impacts highly sugar, fat, and carbohydrate filled foods are for the body and the mind of their developing children. This would make it cheaper for families to buy healthy fruits, vegetables, and meats for their families which would create a positive effect on children's' nutrition. By educating families on the negative impacts of unhealthy food, they will be more aware of what not to buy at the grocery store. Together,

these two solutions can help prevent the onset of childhood obesity as well as treating children that have obesity.

While high prices at the grocery store contribute to what parents decide to feed their children, easy access to unhealthy foods at schools also have a great contribution to childhood obesity. On average, a school aged child spends most of their days at school from age five to eighteen. This means that they are also often eating there too. While many schools have cafeterias that serve meals that can have some healthy elements such as fruit, vegetables, and dairy products, a lot of schools have vending machines that are almost always filled with unhealthy food filled with sugar and fat such as chips, candy, processed meats, pop, and juice. Carter draws on the fact that many schools will agree to having snack food and soda manufacturers place their vending machines in schools in return for a share in the profit (2002). While the earnings from vending machines work to the school's financial benefit, they often do not translate into positive benefits for the children's health. Because vending machines are convenient and only cost a couple dollars for a soda or a bag of chips, children at schools are frequently using them to satisfy their hunger or thirst needs. This is a problem because children are choosing to buy snacks from vending machines rather than buying paying almost double for a healthier snack in the school cafeteria if there is one available. Because some vending machines are already refrigerated to keep pop, juice, and water cold, vending machines have the potential to offer healthier snacks such as cereal bars, yogurt, fruit, and vegetables. While these options would be more expensive than a bag of chips or can of pop, they would be healthier for children. Another solution

would be to regulate how the board of education profits from placing advertisements, products, and services in their schools. School boards are often focused on how they can make a profit when they should be focused on providing education and a healthy environment for children to grow and develop. Together, regulating school boards and providing healthier snack options, schools can help prevent childhood obesity. While unhealthy eating patterns can contribute to childhood obesity, lack of exercise also plays a big role in onset of childhood obesity.

While many believe that obesity is a direct cause of eating foods that are filled with sugar, fat, and sodium, lack of exercise also plays a big role in onset of childhood obesity. Studies have shown that children need at least 1 hour a day of moderate or vigorous exercise where their heart rate and breathing increase (“ How Much Physical Activity”, 2008). Examples of exercise that increase your heart rate are swimming, running, and cycling. Despite its undeniable benefits, children are attending physical education classes at school less and less. In a study done in 2002, students’ attendance for physical education classes was 42% in 1991, down to 32% in 2007 (Carter, 2002). While there are many explanations for why children are increasingly less active at school and at home, technology has been playing a big role in children not wanting to exercise. A great way children usually get exercise is through playing outside. Studies have shown that the reason children are being less active is due to technology. In a study of 8000 children from Scotland, watching more than eight hours of television per week correlated with an increased risk of obesity at age 7 (“ Children, Adolescents, Obesity, and the Media”, 2011). The same correlation is found

in the US, China, and many other countries around the world. A solution to lack of exercise due to technology would be to reduce time spent using technology and increase time spent exercising. Parents can do this at home by engaging in exercise with their children in a technology-free environment. They can go biking, walking, hiking, swimming, or play sports together. Not only is this healthy for the body but spending quality time with family is also good for the mind. Educators can increase participation of students in physical education at school by making an inclusive environment that accommodates everyone. By playing sports and doing activities that everyone finds enjoyable and can do, teachers will make physical education more enticing for the ones who usually do not participate. By frequently encouraging exercise, children will get into the habit of exercising often.

While technology such as phones, laptops, and televisions play a role in lack of exercise in children's lives, the physical environment around them also influences how much exercise they get. Studies have shown that the closer a child lives to their school, parks, walking paths and bike paths, they are more likely to be active (Sallis, 2006). This being said, children that do not live near any of these do not get to exercise as frequently as children who do live near these community features. While it is not as simple as moving so one can be near parks, paths, and schools, parents can still drive to the parks or schools so that they can exercise with their children. The government also plays a big role in the built environment. They can create more parks and paths for families to enjoy the outdoors and get exercise. Together, parents and the government can help ensure that children are getting lots of exercise with their family in safe spaces. Lack of exercise plays a significant

role in childhood obesity, however, family customs can also play a big role in childhood obesity as well.

Much like anything in life, family customs play a pivotal role in a child's health. The fashion in which a child is raised, is a strong determinate of the child's overall lifestyle. When it comes to early onset of childhood obesity, prenatal care plays a significant role. Studies have shown that one of the leading causes of childhood obesity when it comes to genetics is prenatal overnutrition and/or hereditary obesity associated genes. When a mother overeats while she is pregnant with baby, there is an increase in the delivery of nutrients to the placenta (Ebbeling, 2002). As a result of the mothers over consumption, the baby is born with needs for fats a higher daily caloric intake than what they would have needed if the mother did not overeat. While treatment is not easy for childhood obesity caused by genetics, it can be done and it usually requires the help of a pediatrician. In terms of prevention, when a mother is pregnant, she can ensure that she is eating the correct amount of food but not overeating to the point where it negatively impacts her baby. Coupled with family customs such as prenatal care, family customs such as their dietary patterns also have a large impact on a child's weight.

Alongside prenatal care, family customs such as their dietary patterns play a significant role in the probability of childhood obesity. One of the most influential determinants of a child's weight and childhood obesity is their dietary lifestyle. While at a young age, children do not have much say in the food they consume, rather it is the responsibility of the parents to determine

this. Because parents are the mature decision makers of the household, they are doing the grocery shopping and picking what they are feeding their children. These habits are passed on to the children from their parents. In a study done by Sutherland et al., when it came to choosing food and drinks for meals, “ children begin to assimilate and mimic their parents’ food choices at a very young age, even before they are able to fully appreciate the implications of these choices” (2010). This conclusion illustrates the significant influence that a parent’s diet and preference has upon the child’s decision making as they mature. The children who had parents with a preference for unhealthy foods tended to choose unhealthy food options as they grew older which indicates an unhealthy dietary lifestyle. This shows that not only do parents’ dietary choices affect their child’s diet in their childhood but that as the child becomes an adult, they become accustomed to a certain diet and often have problems changing their eating patterns in their adulthood. In order to prevent childhood obesity caused by family dietary patterns, parents need to be more aware of the negative impacts unhealthy eating patterns have on them and their children. The government could provide classes that teach parents about the importance of a healthy lifestyle for children and themselves. Furthermore, the government could create a public service announcement that outlines the negative implications such as the harm it poses to their children of an unhealthy dietary pattern.

The rapid emergence of childhood obesity is one that baffles even the most intelligent people throughout the world. Many associate different reasons for the sudden increase in childhood obesity, however, the issue can be seen through three main causes. The causes of childhood obesity are unhealthy

eating patterns, a lack of exercise, and family customs. While unhealthy eating patterns, lack of exercise, and family customs all play a role in childhood obesity, it can be treated and prevented through implementing physical activity and healthy eating at schools and in homes. If the proper steps and solutions are not taken to prevent and address childhood obesity, then our youth will not be the leaders for tomorrow that they are supposed to be.