

Who's to blame? the obesity epidemic that has swept the us

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There is no question that obesity in the U.

S has skyrocketed. In America, about 31.8% of children and young adults between the ages of two and nineteen are considered obese; approximately 18.6% of these are boys and 15% are girls. In response to the epidemic, former first lady Michelle Obama, during her husband's presidency, launched her Let's Move initiative in efforts to challenge the increasing obesity rates that are taking over the country.

Mrs. Obama's endeavor to fight obesity began with educating the public with the facts. The website Let's Move served as a platform for information, resources, and ways to take action. Obama emphasizes how childhood obesity rates have tripled in the past three decades and the chronic health problems that can stem from it. A big assumption of Michelle Obama's movement was that obesity rates have increased because of a lack of exercise and home-cooked meals; Obama targeting parents expresses the need for a change within the homes of many American families.

So who's to blame for this epidemic? Parents? Schools? Peers? Perhaps the real question is should parents be held fully responsible for this epidemic that has grown way out of hand? In their article, "Parental Influence on Eating Behavior," Jennifer S. Savage, Jennifer Orlet Fisher, and Leann L. Birch, researchers in nutritional science from Penn State, highlight the impact of parents on childhood obesity in relation to early exposure to healthy foods, and the power of the environment children are brought up in. In the early stages of life, children grow rapidly, absorbing information about the environment around them and begin to set a foundation for their future

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eating habits. During this critical time of growth, parents play an enormous role in providing their children with the experiences, knowledge, supplies, and support needed to make healthy decisions.

Throughout childhood, children are exposed to new and exciting things; from the first taste of their mother's nourishing breast milk to the excitement that comes along with sweet and mushy baby foods, to the curiosity that is fulfilled through exploring solid foods, they are constantly experiencing new ways of satisfying hunger. As children experience new foods, they make associations with when certain foods are eaten: how they felt, whether or not they were forced to eat it, and if it was appealing to them. Subsequently, a parent's attitude towards preparation, consuming, and the amount of force needed to feed the child will shape how their children later perceive that food. Studies have shown that social modeling greatly impacts dietary decisions. For example, in "Parental Influence of Eating Behavior," "Low-income adolescent girls who reported seeing their fathers consume milk had higher calcium intakes than girls who did not see their fathers drink milk." Similarly, the extent to which children consume healthy foods correlates with how accessible they are to them.

For instance, if the kitchen in a child's home contains Oreos, chips, ice cream, and chocolate, children they are more likely to consume that than they are to consume fruits, vegetables, and yogurt. Research from "Parental Influence of Eating Behavior" reveals that "the extent to which fruits and vegetables are present and readily available and accessible in the home correlates positively with the level of consumption in school-aged children."

Even before a child is born and old enough to consume solid foods they will have had their first experiences with flavors and foods. Dr. Julie Mennella, a biopsychologist specializing in the development of food and flavor preferences, found that women who consumed carrot juice for three consecutive weeks during their third trimester had infants who expressed fewer negative reactions towards carrot-flavored cereal.

This research shows that what foods a mother consumes during pregnancy will have an effect on the way the child responds to those foods after birth. In addition to the importance of a variety of flavors and nutrition during pregnancy, breastfeeding after birth will have a large impact on a child's weight, vulnerability towards different flavors, and overall health. Among the laundry list of benefits to breastfeeding your baby, is the simple fact that "breastfeeding affords a small, yet consistent, protective effect against obesity." In "Parental Influence on Eating behavior: The Impact of Breastfeeding," author name concludes "The impact of breastfeeding on subsequent weight status may be an example of metabolic or behavioral programming in which the impact of breastfeeding on weight status only emerges later in development and in this case, may not be clearly manifested until adolescence or adulthood." In other words, the benefits to breastfeeding an infant may have both short term and long term effects that may only be seen in their health later on in life.

***** Throughout my childhood, my parents were not particularly strict when it came to food. No one in the house over ate, and no pressure was put on leading a healthy lifestyle. Since my parents were both active and ate

well-balanced, nutrient-dense meals of homemade Indian and American food. Naturally, my sisters and I followed in their footsteps. That's not to say that every so often we wouldn't eat a whole pint of ice cream or indulge in some slim jims, or "sodium sticks" as my mom would refer to them. Regardless of our "cheat days" or our consumption of "road trip treats," we led a healthy lifestyle with well-balanced, nutrient dense foods.

My parents' flexibility and willingness to make these foods accessible to us took away their appeal and just made them another snack option. Since fruits, vegetables and junk food were all equally available, and my parents migrated towards the fruits and vegetables, my sisters and I weren't particularly interested in having the junk food. This availability and trust that my parents put in us to make our own decisions taught us how to self-regulate our junk food intake and took away much of its appeal. Having junk food available no longer made it the forbidden fruit within the proverbial garden of Eden great!. This acceptance and availability of junk food made it much less appealing to our adolescent selves.

My childhood is a prime example of how something called nonrestrictive parenting can be effective and positively impact dietary decisions. Although parents are vital components of their child's road to a healthy lifestyle, many parenting practices that are believed to help may do more harm than good. In their efforts to increase the intake of fruits and vegetables, many parents restrict their children from consuming junk food. However, this process of eliminating access to these foods make them seem more intriguing, and often times result in children being unable to self-regulate their

consumption. Research from nutritional scientists has revealed that “ placing a preferred food in sight, but out of reach, decreases children’s ability to exhibit self-control over obtaining the food.

” As a result, when the restriction is lifted, and “ forbidden” foods are present, children often have difficulty controlling the amount of food eaten, resulting in overeating or eating in the absence of hunger. To understand the truth of this research, just think about all those times you may have eaten without actually being hungry. Maybe those late nights when you had to finish that project? Or study for that test? Maybe during that five hourNetflixbinge, you had last Saturday? Often times we eat to keep ourselves busy. Eating helps us stay awake and provides a way for us to socially interact with the people around us. In the case of the restricted food, commonly candy, chips, and other junk foods, children often have a hard time controlling their portions because they are normally off limits and rarely exposed to them.

This is why the few times those foods may be an option, kids tend to go out of control and overeat without being able to recognize it. In order for us to see a real decrease in the consumption of junk food, parents need to lose sight of the notion that pressuring kids to eat their fruits and vegetables is an effective way to lead them to a healthy lifestyle. Parents often force their children to eat their vegetables by saying they cannot leave until they finish them or “ You’re not getting any dessert if you don’t finish up those veggies!” This pressure may ultimately lead to the disliking of those vegetables and create a traumatic memory for the child that they will not

return to. The sooner we learn that the more labels we put on foods, the harder it is going to be to form genuine opinions based on experience rather than the stigma that is attached to it. Parents are often blamed for the childhood obesity epidemic that has swept the United States.

As stated in "Parental Influence on Eating Behavior," when it comes to food, a majority of parents follow an authoritarian parenting style rather than an authoritative. Authoritarian parenting is a style characterized by high demands and low responsiveness. These parents tend to have very high expectations of their children and yet provide very little emotional support or feedback to help them achieve the expectations placed on them, whereas, authoritative parenting is a style that is child-centered and involves close interaction between parents and their children. This style of parenting has high expectations but supports their children through discipline, schedules, and feedback to help them along the way. Savage, Fisher and Birch's article call attention to this issue by providing us with a national sample that says that "872 socioeconomically and ethnically diverse families with young children, authoritarian parents were almost five times as likely to have an overweight child as authoritative parents, after statistically adjusting for potentially confounding effects of race and income." Likewise, often times people from different cultural backgrounds have different ideas on what is considered overweight.

Many parents do not see their children as overweight and are doing the best they can considering their socioeconomic limits. Within "Parental Influence on Eating Behavior," there is a section called "Differing Perceptions of

Healthy Weight: Socioeconomic and Cultural Contexts,” this section sheds light on that fact that the term “ overweight” is not universally understood as unhealthy or dangerous. For example, many low- income mothers have expressed that if their infant is heavy, it is seen as a sign of successful parenting and a healthy child. The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey of 1988-1994 concluded that “ one-third of mothers with overweight children do not perceive their children as being overweight.” Due to the cultural impact of heavy children being seen as an example of good parenting, many of these parents don’t see anything wrong with their child’s weight or eating habits and believe that their idea of health simply differs from those of health care professionals in the United States.

This misunderstanding has had an increasing impact on the obesity epidemic in the United States. A Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development from the National Institute of Child Health and Human development found that about seventy to eighty percent of low-income mothers recognize their overweight child to be of normal weight or even underweight. So should these parents be to blame? It is clear that they firmly believe that they are doing no wrong by their children and that they are healthy. Although parents have different perceptions of their children and what they deem healthy, should parents be held responsible for all the eating habits their children possess? Although many eating habits come from parents, children learn a lot from eating with and observing how everyone around them eats.

Although teachers do their best to guide their students to a healthy lifestyle, Helen Hendy and Bryan Raudenbush claim that “ enthusiastic modeling by a teacher was not as effective when children were seated with peers who

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exhibited different food preferences than did their teachers.” Over time we have learned that much like most choices in life, our diet is heavily influenced by our peers and the people we surround ourselves with.

Social norms are set by our environment and have a huge impact on the decisions we make regarding our health. Despite strong efforts from parents and teachers, what environment we are in and what foods are preferred by peers are much more influential factors in our dietary decisions. Have you ever been out to eat with a bunch of friends and changed your order based on what the rest of them were getting? If you have, you are not alone! Christine Junge, a former editor for Harvard Health Publications, eloquently spoke about how peers influence what we eat. In her article, “ How your friends make you fat- the social network of weight,” she acknowledges how much people may unintentionally change their eating habits to resemble those of their friends.

As a result, the influence of peers is much more substantial than that of parents and teachers. Regardless of their best efforts to lead children in the right direction, who children surround themselves with will ultimately have a much greater influence on the choices they make. A great example of the way socializing can affect the choices we make is how and what we eat around different groups of people. Jason Thomas and Susanne Higgs, of the school of psychology at the University of Birmingham, reflect on how people modify their eating habits when placed with different groups of people. While observing the different groups it became clear that women ate less in co-ed groups and men ate more. This difference in consumption rates reveals that

social influence from peers is a strong force and that changing to fit in with the crowd could be an immense factor in the rise of obesity rates in the US.

In this one example of the groups in a fast food restaurant one gender ate more than the other; however, in a broader sense, the portions, types of food, and times of day that we eat will be heavily influenced by who are surrounded by. For instance, if all of your friends eat much bigger portions than you, you may unintentionally start eating more simply because everyone else is. In Higgs' and Thomas' article, they claim that " the adoption of normative eating patterns that promote overeating, without later compensation for the additional intake, could explain the clustering of obesity in social networks." In other words, our bodies have not been able to keep up with how much we eat because we are not exercising enough to compensate for the increase in food intake. Overall, social circles will greatly impact the amount, types, and how frequently food is consumed.

While " Parental Influence on Eating Behavior," " Social Influences on Eating" and " How your friends make you fat- the social network of weight" have differing opinions on who's to blame for childhood obesity, they both seem to agree that your environment and the people you are surrounded by will influence what you consume the most. From Orlet, Fisher, and Birch's article, we know that the types of foods parents expose their children to will affect how they react to them in the future. From Higgs' and Thomas' article, we know that people tend to change their eating habits to mirror those around them or adjust them to fit in with the social norms that have been placed on them. Similarly, in Junge's article, she articulates the effects of peer pressure

and the substantial influence your friends can have on your diet. However, what has yet to be determined is which side has a bigger influence.

There is no doubt that parents, peers, socioeconomic status, and environment all play enormous roles on what foods we eat, however through all the research that has been done it is safe to say that environment a child is brought up in has the most overwhelming effect. Despite society's best efforts to point fingers at parents for providing unhealthy meals for their children, the environment in its entirety will influence what foods are accessible, available and commonly enjoyed, which directly correlates with a family's dietary decisions. Referring back to the former first lady, Michelle Obama, and her influential Let's Move campaign, she highlights the importance of paving a child's road to healthy lifestyle from a young age. The campaign provides parents with the knowledge and environment needed to support healthy living. While acknowledging the importance of providing families with the tools needed to adapting a healthy lifestyle, Let's Move works to provide schools with healthier options, and guarantees children of all socioeconomic backgrounds access to affordable healthy food.

Michelle Obama addresses the fact that everyone has to do their part in reducing childhood obesity and that unless nationwide environmental changes are made, not much progress will be made in reducing this obesity epidemic.