



Promoting a healthy weight in children

Table of contents

Promoting a healthy weight in children	1
Why are more kids becoming overweight these days?	2
Physical activity and children.....	3
How active is your child worksheet	4
Healthy eating and children.....	5
Tips to promote healthy eating.....	6
Rating your child's and family's eating habits worksheet.....	7
Body image and children.....	8
What can you do to encourage a healthy body image	9
Things I am besides a body worksheet	10
Body image messages worksheet	11
What can we do as a community?	12
Resources for Parents	13



Promoting a healthy weight in children

This resource is for parents of children aged six to twelve years. It provides information about the reasons behind weight problems and gives ways that you can help prevent these problems in children. There are also worksheets to help you assess your family's lifestyle.

A recent study found that as many as one out of three Canadian boys and one out of four Canadian girls are considered to be overweight. As well, obesity in children has more than doubled between 1981 and 1996.

Overweight and obese children are at risk for several health problems. In the short-term, obesity in children can lead to muscle, bone and joint problems, difficulties sleeping and hormonal problems. The most immediate consequence of being overweight for most children is social discrimination. This is associated with poor self-esteem and depression.

The long-term problems for obese children are related to children becoming obese adults. Overweight adolescents are very likely to become overweight adults, especially if one or more parent is overweight.

Overweight or obese adults are at risk for health problems such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and some forms of cancer.

Efforts to prevent weight problems have to begin early in life. Children's current physical activity patterns and eating habits strongly influence whether or not they will have a healthy weight as an adult. Parents' attitudes towards healthy lifestyles can have a great influence on the habits their children learn when they are young and carry throughout life.

Keep in mind, however, that discussing weight issues in children is a very sensitive subject. It is important that activities to promote healthy weights are planned carefully in order to avoid other serious problems, such as unhealthy dieting behaviours and eating disorders. Too much attention to weight and dieting has been linked to the development of eating disorders and other unhealthy, restrictive eating behaviours.

Please use this resource to promote a healthy lifestyle to the children around you and make healthy eating and physical activity a priority in your community.

Why are more kids becoming overweight these days?



Though genetics plays an important role, weight problems in children are generally caused by lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating patterns. Both of these lifestyle factors are influenced by the environment in which children live.

Children's environment:

In schools: Less daily physical activity, unavailability of healthy food and beverage choices and inadequate time to eat meals can contribute to unhealthy lifestyle patterns.

In the community: There are fewer opportunities to be physically active. For example there are fewer parks, bike paths and hiking trails. The increase in fast food outlets make it tempting for children to grab quick, and most likely, less healthy foods. There is also an abundance of less healthy food choices being marketed to children today.

In the home: Families are busier, which often results in more meals eaten "on-the-run" and outside of the home, contributing to poor food choices. Portion sizes from restaurants and especially fast food establishments have increased greatly over the years. Busy parents are also less likely to initiate or participate in family physical activities.

How do I know if my child is overweight?

There is no one specific weight that is perfect for a child. Don't compare your child to friends and siblings. Everyone inherits a body type and some are naturally thinner than others. Children move through spurts of growth and follow their individual patterns of growth in height and weight.

Some children gain weight before they gain height; other children grow taller before they gain weight.

Talk to your doctor or a dietitian if you think your child is overweight. They will assess your child based on national standards.

What can you do if your child is overweight?

An overweight child probably knows better than anyone else that he or she has a weight problem. Let your child know that whatever his or her weight is, he or she is loved and appreciated. Children always need parental support, acceptance and encouragement.

- Focus on your child's health rather than weight, shape or size.
- Do not single out an overweight child, but focus on gradually changing your whole family's physical activity and eating patterns.
- **Be a good role model. If your child sees you enjoying physical activity and eating healthy foods, he or she is more likely to want to do the same.**
- Never tell a child that they are "on a diet" or "too fat."
- Remember that an appropriate goal for many overweight children is not weight loss, but to maintain their current weight while growing normally in height.
- Consult a dietitian familiar with working with children. This is covered under OHIP with a physician's referral. Call the Registered Dietitian at Health Connection at **1-800-361-5653** for referral information.

Keep in mind that children are growing and their nutritional requirements are high. Putting kids on a "diet" can lead to problems with growth and development as well as being emotionally harmful.

Physical activity and children

A large study found that 31% of Canadian children aged 6-12 are not active enough for optimal fitness, muscle strength and flexibility.

How can you get your kids moving?

Why are children so inactive these days?

- The central role that television, computer and video games play in children's lives,
- Less physical activity in school,
- Families are tight for time, and much less physically active than years before,
- Safety issues around unsupervised outdoor play.



- Plan family activities that provide exercise and enjoyment for everyone. Make it social by inviting friends and neighbours.
- Start with activities your children like the most even if the activities don't require a lot of energy (like bowling), then gradually introduce higher energy activities.
- Get your children involved early in lifelong skills such as swimming, skating, dancing, hockey, soccer, cycling, baseball, tennis or martial arts.
- Provide toys that promote physical activity such as balls, skipping ropes, bikes, scooters, skateboards or in-line skates.
- Offer a wide choice of activities beyond organized sports, such as washing the car, walking the dog, shoveling the driveway, gardening, raking leaves, vacuuming the carpet or sweeping the garage.
- Set limits on the time your children spend watching television, playing video games or surfing the Internet to less than 2 hours a day.
- Encourage your children to participate in team sports at school. Focus on the social 'fun' aspects of team sports and less on winning.
- Make physical activity a normal, pleasurable part of daily life, rather than a separate event that you always have to schedule.
- Teach your children about the benefits of being active, such as improved health, confidence, self-esteem and concentration. Physical activity helps build stronger muscles and bones and increases energy levels.
- Be positive, encouraging and have fun.

Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Children recommends that children get a **minimum** of 90 minutes of physical activity per day.

To check if your child is getting enough physical activity, complete the worksheet "How active is your child" on page 4.

How active is your child?



Too often we assume that children get enough physical activity, but are they really?

Answer the following questions:

- | | YES | NO |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Does your child spend less than 2 hours each day watching TV, playing computer games or on the internet? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. Does your child walk or bike to school? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. Does your child take gym class (at least 30 minutes) at school, every day? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. As a family, do you regularly take part in activities together like hiking, biking, walking, swimming or skating? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 5. Does your child play outside most days? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. Is your child involved in any organized sport(s) or recreational activities at school and/or in the community? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 7. Is your child physically active for at least 90 minutes a day? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

If you answered NO to ANY of these questions, your child may not be enjoying all the benefits of active living! Get out there and get active together!

Adapted from "Active Children, Healthy Children" Health Canada 1996

Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Children

For a copy of this guide, visit Health Canada's website, www.hc-sc.gc.ca. Look in the Healthy Living tab and click on Physical Activity on the side bar (it is under the title "Active Living Guides").

Or call **Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653**



Healthy eating and children

Eating nutritiously provides children with energy and nutrients needed to grow, develop, stay healthy and be active. Healthy eating will reduce the risks of nutrition-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity.



What are children eating?

A study of Canadian children aged 6-12 found that:

- Only 1 in 5 children eat the recommended five or more servings of vegetables and fruit daily
- White bread and pre-sweetened cereals remain popular choices among children

An American study of children found that:

- As children get older, they drink more pop; this increases dramatically by the age of eight
- As children get older they drink less milk; by age 18 they are drinking less than half the recommended amount

How can I get my child to eat vegetables?

Create interest in vegetables by involving your kids - start a vegetable garden, visit a farmers' market, take kids grocery shopping, pick out a recipe together, and let kids help with preparing and serving vegetables. Try offering vegetables when kids are hungriest.

Parents are an important influence on children's food attitudes and habits. Studies show that Dad's acceptance of vegetables directly relates to kids' acceptance. Watch out for the non-verbal information you pass along. Don't wrinkle up your nose while suggesting your child try turnips!

Consider serving raw vegetables - they often have more appeal to kids than cooked veggies. Remember not to force your child to eat certain foods. This will only create a power struggle. The more often children are exposed to a new food, the more likely they are to accept it. It can take up to 12 or more exposures to a new food for a child to actually try it! Try the "one bite rule" - encourage one bite to try it and if they don't like it, they don't have to eat it.

How much should my child be eating?

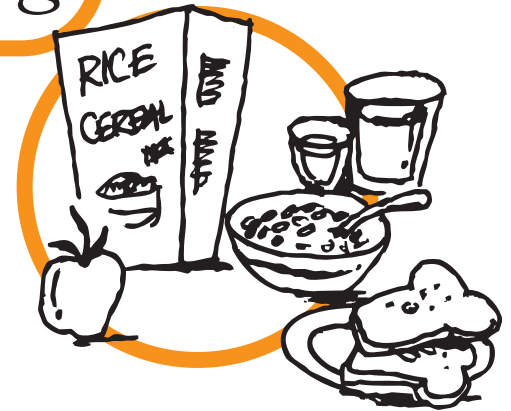
Don't try to control the amount your child eats.

As a parent, your job is to offer healthy meals and snacks at regular times and to decide what and where to eat. It is the child's decision how much to eat.

It is all right for you as a parent to say, "Don't eat now, dinner is in 45 minutes" or "Get out of the cupboard, you've just had a snack."

Tips to promote healthy eating

- Begin the day with a healthy breakfast
- Eat meals together as a family as often as possible
- Guide your family's choices rather than telling them which foods they should eat
- Talk about food in a positive and healthy way, such as drinking milk makes your bones strong or vegetables have nutrients that help you grow and be strong
- Have healthy snacks available that are visible and easy to grab - e.g. a fruit bowl or a container of raw vegetables that are washed and pre-cut
- Make healthy substitutes - e.g. veggies and dip instead of chips and dip, or dried fruit instead of candy
- Encourage children to drink water and to limit beverages with added sugars, such as soft drinks, fruit drinks, and sports drinks
- Encourage children to eat slowly by making mealtimes relaxed and full of conversation
- Get feedback about foods they say they don't like. The flavour of foods can be modified by how it is cooked or with dips or sauces
- Do not use food as a reward and avoid withholding food for punishment
- Plan ahead and make time to pack a healthy lunch that includes foods from 3 out of the 4 food groups from *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*



Should my child eat "junk" food?

Snacks are as important as meals for providing essential nutrients to kids. That's why the best snacks are those from the four food groups of *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*. Foods that do not fit into a food group category are called "Other Foods" - often these foods are higher in fat, sugar or salt. Although these foods can be part of a healthy eating pattern, they should not be eaten in place of foods from the four food groups.



To check to see if your child and family are "eating healthy", complete the worksheet "Rating your child's and family's eating habits" on page 7.

Rating your child's and family's eating habits

Answer the following questions:

YES

NO

Does your family eat meals together on most days of the week?

Does your child...

1. Eat 3 regular meals and small healthy snacks daily?

2. Eat breakfast every day?

3. Eat 5-10 servings* of vegetables and fruit daily?

4. Eat 5-12 servings* of grain products (bread, pasta, rice, cereal) daily?

5. Have enough milk products daily (milk, yogurt, cheese) daily?

· 2-3 servings* for children 4-9 years of age

· 3-4 servings* for youth 10-16 years of age

6. Eat 2-3 servings* of meat/poultry/fish or alternatives (nuts, eggs, legumes, peanut butter) daily?

7. Enjoy a variety of foods every day?

8. Have only limited amounts of foods high in fat, sugar or salt such as chips, pop, candy, chocolate bars and cookies?

If you answered NO to ANY of these questions, your child's eating habits could be improved. Contact a Registered Dietitian at Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653 if you need advice or additional resources.

*For more details about what "a serving" is refer to **Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating.**

This resource can be obtained by calling *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653 or visit Health Canada's website at www.hc-sc.gc.ca (look under the Healthy Living tab and then click on Food & Nutrition on the side bar under the title "Healthy Eating").



Body image and children



What should I know about body image?

It is often hard to help kids feel good about the way they look! Children are exposed at an early age to a culture that emphasizes beauty and thinness as the ideal image for females, and a muscular, fit, lean body as the ideal for males.

- Many elementary-aged children have poor self-esteem and a negative body image
- A 1998 survey found that 28% of Canadian 11 year old girls said they were either on a diet or needed to lose weight; by the time they reached 16 years of age, this number climbed to 44%
- Excessive concern with body image and dieting has been linked to the development of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa*
- Dieting can result in poor nutritional health, which could lead to low bone density (from inadequate calcium) and anemia (from low iron)

If you are concerned that someone you know may have an eating disorder, contact *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653 to speak to a health professional and access the directory of resources for the treatment of eating disorders.

Boys

Studies have shown that there has been an increase in body image concerns among males.

- Ideal look is buff and lean or very muscular
- More likely to be overweight than girls
- Unhealthy behaviours regarding weight and body image include steroid use, protein supplements and binge eating

Girls

- Ideal look - the thinner the better
- Less likely to be overweight than boys
- Unhealthy behaviours regarding weight and body image include dieting, fasting, vomiting, diet pills and smoking to reduce weight
- A group of girls together are very likely to discuss weight and dieting

***Anorexia nervosa** is a complex emotional disorder characterized by deliberate self-starvation in the pursuit of excessive thinness. **Bulimia nervosa** is a complex emotional disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of uncontrolled binge eating, followed by purging, a technique used to rid the body of calories consumed (i.e. vomiting, fasting, misuse of laxatives or diurectics, or vigorous exercise).

What can you do to encourage a healthy body image in your child

- Remind your children that weight gain is a normal and necessary part of development, especially during puberty
- Point out ways advertisers use thin models to sell products and shape our thoughts about weight. Discuss how messages and images in the media can affect your child's lifestyle choices, personal health practices and attitudes
- Accept your children's weights and love them unconditionally
- Refrain from discussing dieting and making negative comments about your own body
- Avoid using words such as "big," "small," "short," "fat," "skinny," "clumsy," or "hippy". These words can hurt
- Discourage teasing and put-downs. Let children know that making comments about people's weight, shape or size is unacceptable
- Praise your children for how they act, how they treat others and what they can do, rather than how they look
- Do not weigh your child. Single measurements here and there are not meaningful
- Encourage children to focus on their abilities rather than on their appearance. Help them identify things they like about themselves. Emphasize qualities of intellect, creativity, physical capabilities, character and personality

Action figures such as GI Joe have become more muscular. The original Luke Skywalker from Star Wars is much less muscular than the current one.

A child's or parent's preoccupation with a child's weight may damage the child's self esteem and lead to depression.

No matter what the weight of your child, always...

- Encourage physical activity
- Promote and practice healthy food choices
- Teach children that people come in all shapes, weights, sizes and colours
- Support and encourage your child to build their self-esteem

Add words like these to your conversations...

"Super!" "Good for you!" "Nice going!"
"Wonderful!"

See worksheets "Things I am besides a Body" on page 10 and "Body Image Messages" on page 11.

Things I am besides a body

Complete this activity with your children to help them identify the many qualities and abilities they have beyond their physical appearances.

Some things I like about myself are: _____

Some things that make me interesting are: _____

Some things that I am interested in are: _____

Some things that I am good at are: _____

Some things that are important to me are: _____

Different roles I play in life (e.g. sister, brother, friend) are: _____



Body image messages

Review the following questions. They will help you identify unhelpful messages you may be sending to children.

- Am I dissatisfied with my shape or size? If yes, do I talk about this? Who do I talk to? Can children in my care overhear?
- Am I always on, or going on, a diet? Are children in my care aware of this?
- Do I express guilt when I eat certain foods?
- Do I associate the word "fat" with negative words such as "stupid", "lazy" or "ugly", or make the opposite association, "nice and skinny"?
- Have I heard, or said, within hearing distance of a child, "Oh, have you lost weight? You look wonderful!"?

The overall message children should receive from adults is that people come in a variety of shapes and sizes, that every body is a good body, regardless of weight, and that no body is "perfect".

What can we do as a community to reduce weight problems in children?

- Is your child's school providing at least 10 to 15 minutes of vigorous physical activity a day as recommended by the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association and the Canadian Pediatric Society? Few schools are. Advocate for more physical activity opportunities in schools (e.g. more school equipment, walking school bus programs, etc.). Contact school councils, school administrators, trustees, York Region Health Services Branch, Provincial Ministers of Education and Health. Talk to your school about how you can provide support
- Request that children have access to the school gym and grounds after school hours
- Communities need to invest in resources that make it easy to be active. Let it be known that you want your tax dollars to support resources that make getting enough physical activity easy for families - trails, bike paths, playgrounds, sports fields, pools, indoor and outdoor skating opportunities, etc. Contact your local Recreation Department and municipal councillors
- Don't underestimate your power as a consumer. Voice your concerns about TV programs to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council by contacting, **(613) 233-4607** or **complaints@cbsc.ca**
Direct concerns about advertising to the Advertising Standards Council (416) 961-6311 or **comments@adstandards.com**
- Advocate for school fund-raising activities that are consistent with healthy eating messages in school curriculum. Express your concern about the availability of pop machines in schools to school trustees and principals
- Educating children about healthy eating is not enough. Advocate for the implementation of school policies to create supportive healthy school environments (e.g. policies around food and beverages sold in vending machines, for fund-raisers, and food choices offered for breakfast and lunch programs)
- Advocate for school policies to include recognition of weight and size acceptance. Within these policies, acceptance of diversity, weight and size discrimination, name-calling and shaming about weight and size can be addressed. Such policies promote self-confidence and respect as well as safety for schools and communities
- Organize and/or participate in community fitness events - fitness festivals, neighbourhood ice rinks, toboggan parties, street dances, volleyball or badminton tournaments, etc.
- Organize a community forum to discuss these issues
- Support Eat Smart! Ontario's Healthy Restaurant Program. These restaurants are awarded for offering healthier choices on their menu. For a pamphlet that lists the "Eat Smart!" restaurants in York Region, call **Health Connection** at **1-800-361-5653** or visit our website at **www.region.york.on.ca**



Ontario's Healthy Restaurant Program

Resources for parents

Berg, F. M.(1997). *Afraid to Eat, Children and Teens in Weight Crisis* 2nd ed. Hettinger, ND: Healthy Weight Publishing Network.

Satter, E. (1987). *How to get your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much*. Palo Alto, CA: Bull Publishing Company.

Satter, E. (1999). *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*. Madison, Wisconsin: Kelcy Press.

Teows, J., Paron, N. (2000). *Raising Happy, Healthy Weight-Wise Kids*. Toronto: Key Porter Books Ltd.

York Region
www.region.york.on.ca

Hearty Party.com
www.heartyparty.com

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada
www.heartandstroke.ca

Canadian Diabetes Association
www.diabetes.ca

Health Canada
www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Promoting a healthy weight in children



This booklet was adapted with permission from the resource entitled
"A Call to Action on Obesity in Children"
by the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit.

This booklet was produced in partnership with:

York Region Health Services Department

Canadian Diabetes Association, York Region Branch

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario, York Region, South

Heartyparty.com