Childhood Obesity, a Growing Concern

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There are many differences between children today and children 20 years ago. One area that is concerning, not only to researchers and politicians, but parents as well, is the increase in childhood obesity, which is reaching epidemic proportions. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) conducted in 2008, the prevalence of obese children in the 6-11 year age range, alone, increased from 6.5% in 1980 to 19.6% in 2008 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Another study conducted by Datamonitor states that 2 out of 5 children in the 6-13 age group are overweight or obese. This equates to 40.7% (Childhood Obesity Expected to be a Growing Concern Through 2014, 2010). There are a wide array of theories on why childhood obesity has climbed including genetics, medical, environmental, and behavioral reasons.

Although these areas may all play a role in this trend, it is important to first understand what changes have occurred over the last 2 decades that would cause a change of this magnitude in children. The obvious cause would be changes that have occurred behaviorally and environmentally. At its simplest form, children eat more and have a more sedentary lifestyle. This seems very obvious on the surface. It is a well known fact that lack of exercise and unhealthy eating habits lead to obesity. What is important to reversing this trend is understanding why children eat less healthy foods and are less active. What aspects of life have drawn children into these unhealthy habits? Why are children less active and drawn to foods that are high in fat and sugars causing childhood obesity to be at its highest point ever? Research on this topic is important, as it is imperative that this trend be reversed. Without a plan, and understanding of the cause of the increase in childhood obesity, the future health and wellbeing of these children is at
substantial risk. Childhood obesity rates can be reversed with changes to behavior and environmental conditions.

The researcher reviewed both qualitative and quantitative research found in scholarly journals, substantive news and opinion magazines, and research reports found through Proquest, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar and other scholarly websites, to search for studies and statistics collected by professionals, in the field of health and wellness in children. In addition to the internet the researcher used the hard copy book Fed Up! Winning the War Against Childhood Obesity. The most valuable resources were those that had been conducted and published in the last 3-5 years. Recent studies and statistics are beneficial to the ongoing research needed in this high profile area. It provided the researcher with a point of reference that is relevant on society today.

Many believe that the increasing trend upward in childhood obesity is due to genetics. However, evidence shows that although children may be predisposed at birth to becoming obese, genetics by itself is not the cause for the increase. In order for genetics to be viewed as the reason childhood obesity has increased dramatically, it would require that the genetic makeup of the human race also change. The researcher could not locate any proof of such a claim. Scientists are confident that the increase is based on environmental factors. There has not been enough elapsed time for a new genetic mutation to grab hold of our society and cause children to become obese (Okie,2005). Therefore, the reason for this trend must be rooted in environmental influences and behavioral changes that have occurred over the last few decades.

In order to prove out the theory the researcher has conducted research on the reasons for the increase in childhood obesity. The researcher has come to the conclusion that children are
living a sedentary lifestyle and consuming a large amount of calories without burning them off. There is a growing trend of inactivity among children. Children are spending more time indoors and eating unhealthy foods leading to increased obesity.

Research shows, that on average, children watch television or are involved in other screen media 5-7 hours per day. (Jordan, 2010) During this time they are exposed to a large number of advertisements for food products that are high in sugar and fat. The presentation of the material is sending a message to children that these foods are acceptable as meals and as a result leading them to believe, falsely, that they are not unhealthy. The more time children spend watching television, the more their body fat percentage increases. This is contributing to the increase in childhood obesity. (Jordan) In addition to the messages children are receiving from advertisements, evidence shows that while children are engaged in television or gaming activities they are more likely to snack more frequently, contributing to the increase in childhood obesity.

Although the amount of time spent on watching television and playing videogames is disturbing, what really is at question is why. Why are children less active? Changes in the family have occurred over the last 20 years. There are more 2 income families and more single parent households. These changes can lead to more children being left without supervision and little planned activities. Safety also plays a role in the amount physical activity that children are involved in. Children in urban environments may not have areas that are free of traffic or an area of protected space in which to play on. In addition neighborhoods in urban areas may be riddled with crime. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Not only does crime and traffic impede the ability for children to enjoy outside physical activity as they had in the past, it also impacts them from obtaining low impact exercise such as that which could be gained from walking to school or to a friend’s home.
Changes in the home over last 2 decades has not only played a role in decreasing physical activity, which leads to obesity, but also with reduced time available, to single parents and dual income families, to prepare foods that are nutritionally balanced. Families often times are left with little option than to serve their families prepared and processed foods with higher calories and less than nutrition.

Evidence shows that families are attempting to do the right things for their children, by keeping them safe and providing them with food, however this tradeoff may not be in the best long-term interest of the child. These changes, to society, which have had an impact on the behavioral and environmental factors, as it relates to health and wellness, can be reversed, with little to no additional effort on the part of families. The end result of the current status quo of eating unhealthy with little to no physical activity is the reason childhood obesity has and undoubtedly will continue to rise.

Many schools have started to implement preventative measures, to combat the rise in childhood obesity. Research shows that school, only, interventions are not having enough of an effect. (Birch, & Ventura, 2009) A whole life approach needs to take place. Changes need to take place in the home, in external environments, and school. There have been no significant changes to the lunch menus, over the last 2 decades. In fact the changes that have occurred have been toward making school meals more nutritionally balanced.

There has however, been a decline in schools in the area of physical activity. With recess being cut back and physical education classes falling prey to budget cuts, there has been a decline in the amount of time spent during school hours on physical movement. Even with this
reduction this is not so significant as to be a cause for the staggering increase in childhood obesity, although, it may be a contributing factor.

Studies show that the main influences on children occur in the home. This is not only limited to general behavior and attitude. The home influences the whole child including healthy eating and exercise. Children are akin to video recorders. They record what they see, and experience, and assume similar roles. If the family eats unhealthy, and limits activity, the child will as well. It is no different than learning math or science, children have to be taught healthy eating and exercise skills in a similar manner.

Research shows that the best approach to combating obesity in children starts with the parents. By having the parents act as mediators for change, and not including the children directly, there was a significant decrease in weight, of the children involved in the study. Parents regulated the foods that were eaten, introducing healthier foods to the children. Parents also participated in regular physical activity, prompting the children to follow suit. (Golan, Kaufman, & Shahar, 2006) By having the parents, as the main facilitators children were less likely to rebel against the change to their diet and exercise routine.

Research shows that there are many reasons as to why children are less active and consuming more foods, that are high in fat and sodium, than children did 20 years ago. Although similar foods were available at that time, the approach to daily living was vastly different. Families typically would eat their meals together at a designated time. Microwaves were not in every home. Prepared foods were not prevalent to the point where you could purchase fully cooked meals at your local supermarket. Fast food take out was a treat, occasionally enjoyed by
families. Advertisements on television were not as prominent as they are today, mainly because there were not as many channels.

Since there were not as many channels available to watch, 20 years ago, children spent less time engaged in television watching, this prompted them to become more involved in physical activities or other hobbies which would utilize the hands. Busy hands cannot aimlessly consume snack foods. In addition, mothers were typically at home with their children and able to monitor their eating habits and involve them in activities. These activities may include outdoor supervised play, walking, or other activities to occupy the body and mind.

Although research shows that time to prepare balanced foods and incorporate physical activity into the daily routine has significantly diminished, it is necessary for this practice to be introduced into the lives of young children. Parents need to take the reins and be responsible for not only the present health and well being of their children, but their future as well.

Parents have many concerns in regards to their children, safety being their top priority. Although this is understandable, parents need to become creative when it comes to getting their children up off the couch and away from the television and computer. It is understandable that parents believe children are safe as long as they are engaged in these activities; the reality is they are not. These activities are causing their children to be unhealthy not only physically but mentally as well. They are not learning the key elements of a healthy lifestyle. These elements include both the mind and body. Children need to understand that what they eat and the amount of exercise they participate in, is a requirement for all of their lives. Children who are obese as children have a higher risk of being obese as adults, and are at risk for serious health issues, including heart disease and diabetes.
The key to reversing the trend of childhood obesity lies in the lifestyle choices that are made, or in some way forced upon families. These choices include the foods that are consumed, and the sedentary lifestyles that have become part of the accepted practice. To reverse this trend families must find ways to cut back the amount of high calorie, high fat foods they make available, not only to their children, but themselves as well. Creative measure related to physical activity must also be sought. Video games may be an alternative to outdoor physical play. Parents can reduce the amount of time their children play sedentary games and replace them with video games that require movement in order to play. This allows the combination of both physical movement and the desired activity of playing video games.

The research shows that the reason behind the increase in childhood obesity is based on behavioral and environmental factors which have changed over the last 2 decades. The approach to combating it does not lie in any one area of child’s life. It must be approached across the child’s entire life, including home and school. Proper foods and exercise which occur in one of the many environments, that a child spends time in, will not reverse this trend. Healthy living habits must be encouraged across all domains of a child’s life, this will pave the way to a healthy lifestyle; decreasing the percentage of overweight and obese children.
References


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