

JOHN C. BRAICO, M.D., F.A.A.P.
KATHLEEN BRAICO, M.D., F.A.A.P.
JAMES D. FUCHS, M.D., F.A.A.P.
DAVID J. HUNT, D.O.
MARY J. NEVINS, M.D., F.A.A.P.

THE LAAKSO BUILDING
84 BROAD STREET
GLENS FALLS, NEW YORK 12801
TELEPHONE (518) 798-9538

THE OVERWEIGHT CHILD (PREADOLESCENT)

Parents and physicians are often concerned when children develop overweight problems when they are young. Obesity after age 1 or 2 often leads to obesity in adulthood. Putting young (preteen) children on a strict calorie controlled diet is difficult and may not be necessary. In most cases we are aiming to slow down or stop the rate of weight gain and improve dietary habits and exercise, rather than actually getting the preteen to lose weight. In order to help your child with weight control, we suggest the following approach:

1. **Aim for healthy food choices:** A) Be sure your child is getting the recommended 5 servings of fruits and vegetables and 3 servings of low fat milk products needed at this age. B) Use raw fruits and vegetables for snacks. C) Avoid baked goods, candy and products high in fat (peanut butter, whole milk products, most cheeses, butter and margarine, mayonnaise, salad dressing, chocolate, etc.). Substitute ice milk as an occasional treat instead of ice cream. Use skim or 1% milk and fat free yogurt. Choose a reduced fat cheese when cheese is eaten. Discourage the child from adding butter or margarine to mashed or baked potatoes, hot vegetables, etc. Eliminate whipped cream and sour cream, use low fat or fat free salad dressings.

The reasons for the major emphasis on fat reduction are several: fat provides more than twice the calories per gram of food than sugar and protein (9 cal/gm for fat, 4 cal/gm for carbohydrates and protein); fat makes up an excessively large proportion of the calories in our diet (it should be less than 30% of total cal from fat); and high fat diets contribute to an increased incidence of heart disease and certain cancers in all people (even “skinny” ones!)

Learn to read labels to avoid buying foods that provide more than 30% of their calories from fat. For instance, a bag of potato chips says: “150 cal per oz, 2 g protein, 14 g carbohydrates, 9 g fat, 0 cholesterol”. Note that zero cholesterol does not mean low fat. This product derives 2 gm x 4 cal/gm or 8 cal from protein, 14 g x 4 cal/gm = 76 cal from carbohydrates and 9 gm x 9 cal/g = 81 cal from fat. $81/150 = 54\%$ of calories are delivered from fat. This product should not be part of a diet when we are trying to restrict fat to less than 30% of calories!

2. Besides watching what our children eat, we need to help them learn to control how often and where they eat. Children who watch a lot of TV become obese both because of lack of exercise and the fact that they eat in front of the TV set. If you insist that all eating be done at the table, the child must make a choice: if he is really hungry, he will be willing to interrupt his activity to sit at the table. Make eating time just that – do not allow reading, TV or other activity at the table. Wean a young obese child off the bottle immediately (if over 1 year old). A child over 1 year old requires 20 to 24 oz of milk/day – more than this encourages obesity. Encourage timed, planned snacks – e.g. fresh fruit at 2 pm everyday. Never use food as a reward.
3. **Exercise:** Most obese children are quite happy to read, color, play board games or Nintendo, or watch TV. Exercise for at least 1 hour everyday (longer on non-school days) accomplishes many purposes: children cannot eat while they play sports, so they will eat less. Exercise burns calories. Most importantly, exercise builds muscle tissue. Muscle tissue burns more calories at rest than fat tissue does; thereby, increasing the child’s resting metabolism rate and improving their cardiovascular health.

In summary, there is a lot that you as a parent can do to help your child avoid lifelong weight problems. By developing good eating and exercise habits when young, you are giving him or her tools that can be used in adulthood as well.