

Practical Guide for the Parents of Overweight Children



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I. Support and praise your child

If you are concerned with your child's weight and would like some practical advice to improve your lifestyle habits, then this guide is for you.

Parent investment in the treatment of an overweight child requires time, motivation and a certain degree of perseverance. But it is an investment worth making, for your child's health and well-being as well as your own!

Your child needs you more than ever to adopt healthy habits and a healthy lifestyle. You are his/her example. When necessary, health professionals can assist you in constructing your example, but only you can make changes.

We wish you pleasant reading!

II. Excess weight in childhood

Excess weight constitutes a major health problem in the European population and more than 20% of children are affected. Your child is not alone!

Excess weight is primarily due to changes in our society that have led to diminished physical activity, a poorly-balanced diet, lack of sleep and, at times, stress in children. Certain families are genetically predisposed to accumulating excess weight.

With excess weight life is not the same: your child dresses differently, he/she can no longer run without becoming winded, he/she may be mocked or teased by classmates.

But excess weight also leads to medical complications in the short and long term, such as cardiovascular disease and type II diabetes.

The gazes, the teasing and the difficulty in accepting his/her body image may have psychological consequences. The impact of excess weight on quality of life and mental health cannot be understated.

For these reasons, it is essential to treat excess weight as early as possible in order to avoid complications.

III. Changing a little is already a lot!

The main goal is to stabilize or slow down weight gain while ensuring normal growth and development.

During the growth period, a child usually gains about 3kg per year. In the case of an overweight child, the objective is not to lose weight, but to let him/her grow tall while maintaining the same weight. In this way, the child will not lose weight, but will "thin out."

The first step is to determine the most probable causes of excess weight in your child, and then to work on changing identified behaviors and habits. The whole family is involved. Parents play a determining role in the behavior of their children, as well as the environment in the home. They are models and serve as important examples for their children.

Lifestyle habits include modes of transportation, sport and leisure activity, sedentary activity (television, electronic games, computers), quality of food and quantity and structure of meals.

It is not easy to change lifestyle. Change takes time. Choose one or two realistic objectives at a time that can be maintained in the long term. Concentrate your energy and efforts to give yourself the greatest chance of reaching your goals.

Changing a little is already a lot!

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IV. Exercise with pleasure

Physical activity has beneficial effects on mental and physical well-being as well as on numerous other aspects of health (heart, bones, muscles and body fat). For health reasons, children should be active at least 60 minutes a day and adults at least 30 minutes (or 3 X 10 minutes) a day.

Exercise in Practice

- Move with your child
- Suggest to your child, regardless of the weather, to walk, bike or take the scooter to school, sports activities and music lessons.
- Use the steps instead of the lift.
- Organize family activities: walking, biking, ball games, walking the dog, etc
- Encourage your child to do group activities outside of school.
- Help your child to find a sport that he/she enjoys.
- Ask your child to help with household chores (e.g. clean his/her room, take out the trash, do the dishes).
- Start slowly and gradually increase the intensity and duration of exercise. The ideal is that your child exercises 1 hour a day

V. Television and computers

Your child expends little energy sitting in front of a television or computer screen, and this leads to weight gain. For every hour spent per day in front of a screen, your child can add 6 to 7 pounds to his/her normal yearly weight gain.

During televised children's programs, there are numerous advertisements selling food items high in sugar and fat content and stimulating your child to snack. Eating in front of a screen interferes with the normal sensation of satiety.

Watching television just before bedtime can interfere with your child's quality of sleep.

Television/computer time in Practice:

- One hour a day of screen time is enough!
- Establish clear rules and plan programs in advance: you decide when and how much time your child spends in front of the screen.
- Avoid putting a television or computer in your child's room.
- Turn off the TV during meals and don't allow eating in front of the screen.

VI. Eating with pleasure

Dietary restrictions create a great deal of frustration and conflict within the family. Strict diets for children are strongly discouraged as they are ineffective, counter-productive and sometimes even dangerous.

The goal for the whole family is a balanced diet with variety and healthy choices, as well as structured meal times and snacks.

As for the child, he/she is encouraged to listen to internal signals such as feelings of hunger or satiety, but also to taste new foods in order to diversify the diet.

Eating in Practice:

- Balanced meals.
- 5 portions of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Water
- Sensation of hunger or satiety to determine quantity.
- A balanced breakfast each morning.
- Healthy snacks according to need.
- A variety of foods at mealtime which everyone must, at the very least, taste.

VII. Balanced Meals

To create a balanced dinner plate in practice:

- At least 1/3 of the plate as cooked vegetables, salad or vegetable soup.
- 1/3 of the plate as pasta, bread, rice, potatoes, cereal, etc.
- 1/4 of the plate as meat, fish, eggs, cheese, tofu, lentils, chick peas, etc.
- One soup spoon of oil per person per meal.

The objective:

5 portions of fruits and vegetables per day.

A gradual increase in consumption of fruits and vegetables. For example: one glass of fruit juice at breakfast; salad with entrée and a peach for dessert at lunchtime; an apple at snack time and one bowl of vegetable soup with the evening meal.

One portion of fruit or vegetable is represented by the size of the child's hand.

Water and non-sweetened beverages

Water is the only indispensable beverage. For quenching thirst water, carbonated or non-carbonated, or herbal non-sweetened drinks are ideal beverages. Soda, lemonade, iced tea and syrups are high in sugar content. Fruit juice also contains sugar. One glass a day is sufficient!

VIII. Managing Quantities

Hunger means that it is time to eat, but it does not provide us information about the quantity to eat. People experience hunger differently (empty sensation, hollow, gurgling, fatigue or irritability).

Craving is the desire to eat with or without hunger. Satiety (feeling satisfied) is experienced when the stomach is full. The feeling of hunger disappears.

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Quantities in Practice:

- Don't force your child to finish his/her plate if he/she is no longer hungry.
- Place vegetables first on the dinner plate.
- Serve your child on a dessert plate.
- Avoid putting food directly on the table.
- Suggest a salad or vegetable soup as a starter.
- Make him/her wait 5 – 10 minutes after finishing the first plate and ask if he/she is still hungry.
- Serve small portions for everyone.
- Place packaged food on a plate or in a bowl instead of eating out of the packet.
- Nurture the ambiance at meal time with candles, table cloth, etc and avoid disagreeable subjects.
- Eat slowly in order to recognize your body's signals.

IX. The Structure of your Meals

Find your own rhythm for meals and snacks and avoid snacking in-between. Eating something in the morning allows us to distribute our energy intake throughout the day and gives us better nutritional balance. Children who do not manage to eat breakfast can have a snack at 9-10 o'clock, for example.

Snacks in Practice:

Depending on your child's physical activity, one or two portions of the following foods may be served:

- Fruits (fresh, cooked, dry), vegetables, dips or juice
- Dairy products (Yogurt, milk, cheese)
- Carbohydrates (bread, cereal bars, muesli, etc.)
- Water

Certain snack foods are high in hidden fat and sugar content (e.g. cookies, chips, chocolate bars). One of these a day is sufficient, but none is even better!

Snacking is defined as eating between meals. Restricting or making your child feel guilty is counter-productive. Instead, try to help him/her to identify triggers for snacking and look for ways to limit or do away with the triggers (boredom, sadness, frustration, presence of food in the kitchen, etc).

X. Advertising and Grocery Shopping

Advertisements targeting families and, in particular, children are in great abundance. Unfortunately, the information is not always accurate. Remember to read labels and discuss the topic with your child.

Grocery Shopping in Practice:

- Beware of promotions that offer you more than you want.
- Try to organize a shopping schedule to limit the number of times you visit the supermarket.
- Prepare a list of items to buy.
- Avoid grocery shopping on an empty stomach.
- Encourage your child to choose fruits and vegetables.

XI. A Varied Diet

A varied diet is essential for giving the body what it needs. Maybe there are foods that your child does not like. Remember, certain foods require taste trials of up to 15 times before that food is savored. So, patience!

A Varied Diet in Practice:

- Ask your child to taste foods again and again.
- Add color to your dinner plate
- Allow your child to participate in grocery shopping and preparation of meals.
- Parents are role models. Be an example!

XII. Image and Self-Esteem

Our society places great importance on image. It encourages thinness and calls attention to roundness. Overweight children often suffer from teasing and negative comments. This is particularly harmful when it comes from other members of the family. Youths who have poor self-esteem are at greater risk for gaining weight and adopting inadequate diets.

Image and Self-Esteem in Practice:

- Accept your child as he/she is.
- Help your child to like him/herself.
- Tell him/her that you love him/her
- Regularly point out your child's qualities and the things he/she does well.
- Encourage your child to participate in activities that he/she enjoys and in which he/she feels comfortable.
- Don't place too much importance on physical appearance.
- Don't tolerate comments or jokes about weight or physical appearance.
- Faced with teasing, your child needs your support. Take the time to talk with him/her.
- Listen to the suffering of your child.
- Criticism does not motivate. Avoid it!

XIII. For Advice/Support

You may call or consult:

- your child's physician
- the school nurse/physician in your region
- a dietician

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