Focus on the Home

Overweight is beginning earlier and earlier in life. There is evidence that excess weight gain within the first 4 months of life predicts becoming overweight during childhood. Overweight status in childhood and adolescence predicts obesity in the adult years, particularly if either parent is overweight. Overweight in childhood is a health risk. Overweight children begin to develop weight related conditions such as high cholesterol and insulin resistance, leading to diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (CVD), as well as structural problems such as asthma, sleep apnea and musculoskeletal injuries. It is imperative that the primary environment in which children form their lifestyle habits, learn eating patterns, develop food preferences, and adopt a preference for an active or sedentary lifestyle, be one that promotes physical activity and healthful eating. Primary prevention of overweight begins in the home environment.

Parents as Gatekeepers

Parents and other family members are the primary transmitters of lifestyle behaviors, especially during the years before children enroll in school. Parents are the primary gatekeepers of food choices and access to regular physical activity. Mothers should be encouraged to exclusively breastfeed their infants because it is the healthiest form of early feeding, and it may be protective against overweight during childhood. One of the most important aspects of this form of feeding is the ability of the child to self-regulate food intake. It is important for parents to allow their infants and children to learn to self regulate food intake (i.e., pay attention to internal cues of hunger and satiety). Overall, healthy children who are growing at a steady rate will take in the appropriate amount of calories needed for growth.

It is up to parents to present healthy food choices. Parents are also the gatekeepers of access to TV, computer and video game time. Many children and adolescents exceed the recommended 2 hours per day limit, and it is not recommended that toddlers under 2 years of age watch TV at all.

### Family Strategies to Prevent Overweight During Childhood

**Healthy Lifestyle**
- Emphasis on health, not weight size or peer group acceptance.
- Make children aware of the effects of media pressure to be thin.

**Self-Regulation of Food Intake**
- Children’s appetites normally vary. While parents should choose what they eat, allow children to choose how much to eat.
- Exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months reinforces self-regulation.

**Family & Community Partnerships**
- Creation of healthy eating and activity venues where families can engage in healthy behaviors together.

**Physical Activity Goals**
- Children should be active at least 60 minutes a day.
- Limit screen time (TV, computer, and video games) to no more than 2 hours a day.
- Children under 2 years of age should not watch TV at all.

**Parental Role-Modeling**
- Modeling of nutrition and physical activity is key to the establishment of healthy habits in children.
- Start good habits in childhood, NOT DIETING.

**Fruit & Vegetable Goals**
- Early introduction of fruits and vegetables helps children develop healthy food preferences.
- A healthy diet including 9 daily servings of fruit and vegetables in childhood helps prevent overweight and weight related disease.
Establishing Dietary and Physical Activity Patterns

Healthy eating patterns and food preferences are established as early as the first year of life. Children model the dietary patterns of their parents in the younger years, most often modeling the mother who provides their food. If offered a variety of healthy foods in a consistent manner, children will develop varied taste preferences. Over-feeding, early introduction of sweet, salty and high fat foods and rewarding young children with food establishes unhealthy lifelong food preferences and eating habits. Early and persistent introduction of fruits and vegetables, avoidance of high fat, high salt foods, concentrated sweets, and soft drinks helps children to develop food preferences that are health promoting.

Introduction of fruits and vegetables early in life helps children attain the recommended 9 servings per day. Achieving this eating pattern is associated with a healthy weight and reduced incidence of diabetes, various cancers and heart disease in adults and the precursors of these diseases in childhood. As the antecedents of diabetes and CVD are known to begin in childhood, a healthy diet in childhood is also a form of prevention of overweight and weight related disease. Many parents are unaware of the connection between childhood overweight and the development of adult disease.

Parents transmit physical activity patterns to their children. Active parents who support their children’s participation in physical activity have more active children and this is associated with lower weight and better health. Excessive television viewing (over 2 hrs per day) by children is associated with lower levels of physical activity and increased risk of overweight. Both weight status and activity levels track into adulthood. Early establishment of an active family lifestyle is likely to be more successful than adding “exercise” as a weight management tool later in life. Parental support and modeling of physical activity can help shape children’s physical activity patterns.

Supporting Parents and Families

Parents benefit from gaining knowledge and learning skills that enable them to understand what is a healthy weight for their child, set realistic weight and behavior change goals, implement healthy lifestyle behaviors (reducing TV watching, for example) and model healthy eating patterns and activity levels. Health care professionals, including obstetricians, pediatricians, nutritionists, nurses, and psychologists should be part of the team that supports parents and families in overweight prevention and management. Clinicians should regularly monitor children’s weight status and educate families to the health risks of overweight. Thorough and repetitive education mixed with problem solving strategies, offered by a trusted “expert”, can help families to establish healthy behaviors around eating and physical activity. Families whose children are becoming overweight or who are currently overweight should be encouraged to visit their healthcare provider. Contrary to a common misconception, children do not grow out of being overweight; rather, overweight children are at high risk for becoming overweight adults and developing weight related disease.

Families cannot implement and sustain health promoting eating and activity patterns in their children without concrete support from community organizations and agencies. Community stakeholders must actively engage in childhood prevention efforts that support families in their efforts to provide children with healthy eating and activity environments, such as venues that offer healthy food choices.

COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL FAMILY BASED METHODS TO IMPACT WEIGHT IN CHILDREN

- Parents need knowledge about healthy eating and physical activity habits and about the health risks of unhealthy food choices, weight promoting eating patterns and sedentary behavior.

- Parents need to be committed to and actively involved in the creation of a healthy home-based food and physical activity environment.

- Parents and children need a plan for establishing and accomplishing healthy eating and activity patterns. The plan should strive to achieve increasing the amount of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity to 60 minutes a day, decreasing sedentary activity (TV and screen time) and eating 9 servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

- Parents and children need a plan for monitoring their efforts so that problem solving can occur when slips and setbacks (such as loss of motivation or the impact of life stresses) occur. Behavioral contracting (such as use of a star chart to earn points toward non-food rewards) for healthy food choices and achieving physical activity goals is frequently used. The focus should be on improving health, not weight goals.

- Strategies to prevent overweight need to be incorporated into the family lifestyle and must be reinforced by continual long-term parental involvement and role modeling.
Parents need to
In addition to the
State of Georgia resources:

Pediatricians, the front line for giving
reimbursement for teaching parents how
to implement nutrition guidelines and
programs in their home. Few
pediatric practices are able to support a
nutritionist or physical activity specialist
as part of their routine healthcare team
because reimbursement is inadequate
to cover routine prevention services.
Legislative initiatives that impact
insurance reimbursement for prevention
services, need to be made a priority
to impact overweight development
in children.21

Parents as Advocates
Although the foundations of healthy
eating and physical activity habits can
be modeled and developed in the
home, children experience alternative
options and values in school and
community settings. Media outlets
also play a role in food preferences and
consumption habits.21 Parents need to
assume an active role in shaping the
eating and activity environments with
which their children will come into
contact. Although there are many
acknowledged environmental and
practical barriers to parents becoming
an agent of change in the community
setting, parent advocacy groups in
religious, community and school
settings can become the voice to
promote access to healthy food, physical
activity venues and health education
services. Partnership with community
leaders can guide parental efforts to gain
access to services and impact the child’s
environment. Parent advocacy groups
like the Parent Teachers Associations
(PTA) or Organizations (PTO) are
prime examples of parent-run advocacy
groups, which in concert with law
makers, have spear-headed efforts to
change fundraising events from food
events, change vending machine or
cafeteria content and have helped to
lobby lawmakers to modify physical
activity requirements and nutrition
guidelines in the school setting.22

Collective Action:
The Key to Success
Parents are the gatekeepers for healthy
food choices and physical activity.
Development of a healthy food and
activity environment in the home
begins before the child is born and
must be maintained and adapted to
the developmental needs of the child
through adolescence.23 In addition to the
need for the development of healthy
eating and activity patterns in the
home environment, families can help
create non-obesigenic environments
in many parts of their child’s life by
adopting family/community partner-
ships. Parents can become informed
consumers, asking health care providers
to offer information about age appro-
priate feeding practices and patterns,
weight status and normal age and
gender recommendations for food
and activity. Religious institutions can
be home to a wellness program that
teaches and promotes healthy lifestyle
behaviors, taught and staffed by
parents in the context of a meaningful
social group.

Thus, although parents are the primary
gatekeepers of the lifestyle development
of their children, family and commu-
nity partnerships will be necessary to
produce consistency in children’s food
and activity environment. Parents,

however, remain the primary agent
in helping children achieve healthy
eating and activity patterns.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

• Nutrition guidelines:
  American Dietetic Association,
  www.eatright.org
  Gerber Products
  Association, www.gerber.com/
  breastfeeding
  US Department of
  Health and Human Services,
  www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/
dga2005/document
  US Department of Agriculture,
  www.mypyramid.gov
  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,
  www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov

• Recommendations for physical
  activity: American Heart
  Association/American College of
  Sports Medicine, www.acsm.org
  National Association for Sport
  & Physical Education,
  www.aahperd.org/naspe/template.c
  fm?template=ns_index.html

• State of Georgia resources:
  Georgia Department of Human
  Resource, Division of Public
  Health: www.health.state.ga.us
  Georgia Department of
  Early Care and Learning,
  www.healtheatingforlife.org
  Georgia Department of
  Education, School Nutrition
  Program, www.doe.k12.ga.us/
  fbo_nutrition.aspx

• Programs may also be avail-
  able through local parks and
  recreation departments, schools
  and community sponsored after-
  school programs, such as
  YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs
  and other organizations.
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For information, contact PLAY project director Rodney Lyn at rlyn1@gsu.edu or (404) 413-1133.

References: References for this brief are available on-line at http://publichealth.gsu.edu/Play/Index.html