

SportsNutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen Your Overweight Child: What's a sports-parent to do?

"My son is chubby. What can I do to help him lose weight..?"

"My ten year old niece sure could skip a few meals...."

"One of my kids is skinny but the other child is chunky. How can I feed one but restrict the other?"

Most readers of my sports nutrition articles are lean and fit. But with more than 60% of Americans being overfat or obese, you likely have relatives who are fat, unfit, and unhealthy—perhaps even your fifth grade daughter who is pudgy or your chunky son who loves TV.

As a sports-parent, you can be a good role model for athleticism and healthful food choices. But when it comes to controlling your children's eating and exercise practices, you likely feel more and more out of control with each passing year. Once your child is old enough to march off to CVS to spend his or her allowance on candy, chips and soft drinks, what can you do to regain control without becoming the food police—especially if your child is overweight?

The answer is complex, under-researched, and a topic of debate among parents and pediatricians alike. We know that restricting a child's food intake does not work. Rather, restricting kids' food tends to result in sneak-eating, binge-eating, guilt, shame--the same stuff that adults encounter when they "blow their diets." But this time, the parents become the food police—an undesirable family dynamic.

Despite your best intentions to prevent creeping obesity, do not put your overfat child on a diet, deprive him of french fries, nor ban candy. Dietary restrictions don't work – not for adults, and not for kids. Think about this: If diets did work, then the majority of people who have dieted would all be lean. That's far from the case.

Diets for children cause more problems than they solve. They disrupt a child's natural ability to eat when hungry and stop when content. Instead, the child overcompensates and doesn't stop when he's content (binges) or stuffs himself with "last chance eating." You know, "Last chance to have birthday cake so I'd better eat a lot now because when I get home, I'm back to celery sticks and rice cakes."

If you are a parent of a chubby child, note that children commonly grow out before they grow up. That is, they often gain body fat before embarking on a growth spurt. Instead of putting your daughter on a diet (which damages self-esteem and imprints the message she isn't good enough the way she is), get her involved in sports and other activities. You can delicately ask if she is comfortable with her body. If she is discontent with her physique and expresses a desire to learn how to eat better, arrange for a consultation with a registered dietitian who specializes in pediatric weight control. (Use the American Dietetic Association's referral network at www.eatright.org.) You can also read books such as Ellyn Satter's *Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming* and *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*.

Is your child really overfat? If you are feeling anxious about your child's weight, get some professional advice from the pediatrician to determine if the problem is real. You must remember the body your 10 year old daughter has during pre-puberty will change as she grows and develops. You can also monitor your child's weight on charts available at www.cdc.gov/growth_charts.

Some parents are rightly concerned about their child's weight; we're seeing more and more medical problems with childhood diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. But for other parents, the concerns about their child's weight reflects their own anxiety about having an "imperfect" kid. Yes, you say you want to spare your child the grief of being fat—but be sure to also examine your own issues. If you yourself are very weight-conscious and put a high value on how you look, you may be feeling blemished if your child is overfat. Often, the child's weight problem is really the parent's issue. You may want a "perfect child."

Be sure to love your overfat child from the inside out--and not judge him from the outside in. Just little comments ("That dress is pretty, honey, but it would look even better if you'd just lose a few pounds.....") get interpreted as "I'm not good enough." Self-esteem takes a nosedive and contributes to anorexic thinking, such as "thinner is better."

So what can you do to help fat kids slim-down? Instead of maligning them and trying to get them thin by restricting food, we can get them healthier by helping them see the benefits of being more active. This could mean watching less TV, planning enjoyable family activities (unlike boot camp), and perhaps even creating a walking school bus with the neighborhood kids. As a family, you might want to sign up for a charitable walking or running event. As part of a society, make your voice heard about the need for safe sidewalks, health clubs that welcome overfat kids, swimming pools that allow children (and adults, for that matter) to wear T-shirts and shorts instead of embarrassing bathing suits.

Food-wise, provide your kids with wholesome, nourishing foods, as well as semi-regular "junk foods." (Otherwise, they will go out and get them). Encourage them to eat breakfast. Plan structured meals and snacks; take dinnertime seriously. Your job is to determine the *what*, *where* and *when* of eating; the child's job is to determine *how much* and *whether* to eat. (That is, don't force them to finish their peas, nor stop them from having second helpings.) If you interfere with a child's natural ability to regulate food, you can cause a lifetime of struggles. Trust them to eat when hungry, stop when content—and have plenty of energy to enjoy exercise.

Sports dietitian Nancy Clark, MS, RD has a private practice in Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill, MA. Her best-selling *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*, and her *Food Guide for Marathoners* and *Cyclist's Food Guide* are available at www.nancyclarkrd.com and www.sportsnutritionworkshop.com.