



## Key Steps To Prevent and Treat Childhood Weight Problems

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Prevention and treatment of childhood weight problems and the development of lifetime healthy eating and exercise habits begins in childhood:

### Build Healthy Attitudes

- Demonstrate your unconditional love for your child. Children – especially overweight children – need support, acceptance, and encouragement from their parents.
- Build self-esteem by focusing on all of your child's positive qualities, unique talents, and individuality.
- Help your child develop interests and skills that increase their success and pleasure, so they will be less likely to turn to food for fulfillment.
- Help your child develop good communication skills and encourage them to express their feelings.
- Teach your child effective emotional coping skills to decrease the chance that food will serve that purpose for them.
- Emphasize the importance of good health, not ideal weight.
- Never tease or criticize a child or adolescent about their weight. Such comments are hurtful and can stick with a person for a lifetime.
- Be a positive role model. When your child observes you enjoying healthful foods and physical activity, they are more likely to do the same.

### Enjoy an Active Lifestyle

- Help your child build a lifetime exercise habit by making consistent physical activity a high priority in your family.
- For children that have been relatively inactive, an exercise program should be initiated very gradually to avoid injury and discouragement.
- Encourage active play like biking, swimming, and playing ball.
- Participation in individual and team sports can be a great way to build coordination, athletic skills, and self-confidence.
- Reduce the amount of time your family spends in sedentary activities like TV and video games.
- Plan fun family activities that provide everyone with exercise, enjoyment, and time together.



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### Develop Healthy Eating Habits

- Children have the ability to regulate their caloric intake to meet their needs. Respect these internal cues of hunger and satisfaction.
- Do not force children to clean their plates or bribe them with dessert for finishing their meal.
- Never use food as a reward. Reward desired behavior with praise, extra attention, and privileges.
- Do not comfort your child with food. Use understanding words and hugs instead.
- Do not impose stringent food rules, since this may lead to rebellious eating when the child is away from parental control.
- Don't say or imply that some foods are "good" while others are "bad." Instead, teach children that some foods are healthier than others. This will help them learn to balance eating for health with eating for pleasure.
- Involve children in shopping, meal planning, and preparation. This is a great opportunity to teach them about nutrition—and they will be more likely to try new foods if they helped make them!
- Since children (and adults!) have a natural preference for sweet and high fat foods, it's reasonable to limit the amount of sugary and fatty foods that are readily available to encourage intake of more nutrient dense foods.
- Provide a variety of delicious healthy choices for snacks and mealtimes. Suggestions include fresh or dried fruits, vegetables with tasty low fat dips, pretzels, reduced fat cheese or peanut butter and crackers, yogurt, fruit smoothies, whole fruit ice pops, granola bars, turkey roll-ups, or snack mixes made of cereal, dried fruit, and nuts.
- A healthy breakfast is a great way to start the day and is important for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.
- Encourage children to drink water and fat free or low fat milk (whole milk if under two years of age) instead of sugary sodas, fruit drinks, and sports drinks.
- Promote a high fiber diet by giving your child whole wheat breads and pastas, brown rice, and five servings of fruits and vegetables daily. They will prefer these if that is what they are used to.
- Perhaps most importantly, sit down and eat together as a family. Mealtimes should be a pleasant time to reconnect with one another.
- Emphasize the importance of good health and be a positive, encouraging role model for your family!

