



Promoting Healthy Behaviors to Prevent Obesity and Unhealthy Weight Control in Our Youth



The rates of obesity in America's children and youth have tripled in the last quarter century. Approximately 20% of our youth are now overweight with obesity rates in preschool age children increasing at alarming speed. Certain racial and ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected, especially those from lower income households. Low-income minority children have a greater risk of being overweight or obese, eating fewer fruits and vegetables, and engaging less in physically active lifestyles.

The causes of obesity are complex:

- genetic, metabolic, physiologic, and environmental factors
- social and cultural contexts, which affect eating behaviors, diet, physical activity, and satisfaction with one's own body
- socioeconomic considerations, such as access to affordable healthy food and safe environments for physical activity

Unhealthy weight control behaviors (e.g., fasting; skipping meals; eating very little food; vomiting; and using diet pills, laxatives, or diuretics) have also been found to co-occur with obesity. Many adolescents, particularly teenage girls, have body image concerns and engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors.

Food industry advertising that targets children and youth has been linked to the increase of childhood obesity. Advertising by other industries often objectifies girls and women, contributing to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression.

Obese children are more likely to have a lifetime of chronic health complications, including:

- diabetes
- asthma
- sleep apnea
- cancer
- cardiovascular disease

They are more likely to experience symptoms of psychological and social distress due to the stigma of being overweight or obese, including:

- social isolation
- behavioral difficulties
- negative self-view
- low self-esteem
- depression
- suicide

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Weight bias may lead to bullying and victimization by their peers and has even been associated with teachers and school staff attributing less desirable personality characteristics to obese youth and their families.

Families can help. How the family conducts its mealtimes, the regularity of family mealtimes, and the value that the family places on regular family mealtimes may improve nutrition habits and healthy weight in youth. To promote active lifestyles youth and families need access to safe spaces for physical activities, access to a variety of foods, and opportunities for physical activity regardless of physical ability. Effective partnerships with day care settings, preschools, schools and the broader community must also be established to promote healthy and active lifestyles for children and youth.

Psychology has an important role to play in promoting healthy and active lifestyles in our youth. Psychology can challenge the disproportionate emphasis on weight reduction (which further stigmatizes our youth and may unintentionally encourage unhealthy weight control behaviors) and foster the adoption of healthier diets and greater physical activity. Psychologists have the expertise to develop effective, culturally centered, community-based prevention efforts. The joint prevention of childhood obesity and unhealthy weight control behaviors has the potential to benefit the physical and mental well-being of children, teens, and young adults.

Psychologists can play a unique role in:

- informing the public and setting research agendas to promote healthy eating strategies in the home
- promoting active family lifestyles
- reducing exposure to targeted food advertising to children
- improving body satisfaction
- reducing weight stigmatization
- raising awareness of the connection between obesity and unhealthy weight control in youth.

APA is promoting this new approach and approved a Resolution on the Promotion of Healthy Active Lifestyles and Prevention of Obesity and Unhealthy Weight Control Behaviors in Children and Youth (www.apa.org/pi/cyf/policy-obesity.html) in February 2009.

Additional APA resources on this topic include:

APA Topics: Obesity - <http://www.apa.org/topics/topicobesity.html>

Eating Disorders - <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=9>

Mind/Body Health - <http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=106>

Obesity in Youth: Causes, Consequences, and Cures - <http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4317176>

Task Force on Adolescent Girls - <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/adolesgirls.html>

Task Force Report on Advertising and Children - <http://www.apa.org/pi/cyf/advertisingandchildren.pdf>

Task Force Report on the Sexualization of Girls - <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>

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