

# Childhood Obesity: Downsizing a Growing Epidemic

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## Introduction: A Substantial Predicament

As everyday life grows more hectic and the world continues on a fast-paced track, the farther the public is moving from experiencing a healthy existence. In society today, fast-food restaurants have become the norm, and busy schedules common in this culture leave little room for a person to remain in good physical condition, especially for the younger generation. Children are normally left to their own devices, as television, video games, computers, and junk food fill the void. Even at school, children are presented with ways to be unhealthy, both in and outside the classroom. Because of this, the rates of obese adolescents are increasing. While some steps are already in action, more must be done in order to decrease the high percentages of obese youth. This widespread outbreak of childhood obesity can be reduced through joint efforts between school systems and parents by altering food choices and mandating stricter physical activity requirements in academic settings.

## Identifying the Problem: Children and the Growth Factor

### Defining Obesity

It is obvious that obesity is a disorder that must be solved immediately. Obesity is defined as excess body fat that accumulates due to an unbalanced energy level in the body. Most often, this unbalanced level occurs when people take in more calories than they are able to burn. The body mass index or BMI classifies overweight children by using a formula that considers both body weight and height. The BMI of a person is found by taking the product of their weight

in pounds and the number 703, which is then divided by their height in inches. Research shows that people who are obese normally fall into the ninety-fifth percentile of the BMI chart (“Overweight”, sec. 3). The BMI chart is useful in determining those who are at risk and those who actually are obese. It is also a tool which is crucial in discovering the extent to which this disorder can reach.

### Escalating in Frequency

Affecting families across the globe, childhood obesity has taken its toll worldwide. While many countries are filled with overweight children, this issue is especially rampant in the United States. As a result, numerous surveys have been performed to assess the rate the disorder occurs. The “Prevalence of Overweight Among Children and Adolescents,” a study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, has--- found estimates of the percentages of obesity throughout the years by using the BMI standards for children.

(par. 1).

Clearly illustrating the numbers associated with obesity, this chart presents evidence that something must be done to stop these rates from climbing. This same study confirms that there has been a 45% increase in the number of overweight children from earlier surveys conducted before 1999. Statistics also show that around thirteen percent of all children six to eleven years old are overweight, and this number remains the same for adolescents twelve to nineteen years of age (“Prevalence”, par. 1). Goals need to be in place in order to diminish the amount of unhealthy children in the world. These goals can only be set after identifying the sources of the problem.

## Recognizing the Causes

Various possible causes for overweight young people abound, especially now.

According to “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity,” a work sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, genetics and an unhealthy lifestyle contribute greatly to the weight of a child (sec. 2). Children in homes with a family history of obesity are more prone to becoming obese themselves due to traits passed down, the way of life, and customs common to that particular family. For example, overweight parents who do not eat properly or do not exercise regularly make their child more susceptible to learning these same habits. While genetics do play an important role, it is not the only factor that attributes to being overweight. The majority of young people have an unhealthy diet. Many meals eaten consist of foods high in fat and have a high caloric intake. Shirley Ekvall and a team of writers, who researched obesity, believe that obese children do not normally eat more food than their peers who are at a healthy weight (165). They are, however, more likely to choose the wrong types of foods, mainly those that are greasy or sweet.

Along with these food choices, obese children tend to have a sedentary lifestyle.

Television is a main component of everyday life, and children spend a great deal of their time in front of it. An estimated 43% of youth watch at least two hours on a daily basis (“The Surgeon”, sec. 2). Technology, like computers and video games, are becoming more and more popular, while the prevalence of being physically active is declining. Although most of the responsibility for the basis of obesity lies with children and their parents, there are also outside forces that help this problem remain detrimental.

## Opposition to Change

The majority of resistance to change stems from vending machine and soft drink companies. Beverage companies are pushing to keep their products on the shelf at schools. These companies supply the foods and drinks that support an unhealthy lifestyle. Many schools are hesitant to change or remove these machines because they are worried that their revenue may suffer since they need the money that vending machines produce. Plenty of schools do not believe they have the funds to start programs to help obese kids, but schools that already have specific wellness policies in position say that these changes will pay for themselves over time (Thompson, par. 24). Research has also shown that in areas where soda machines have already been removed that there has been no significant change in school income. For example, author Bruce Buchanan, who covers kindergarten to twelfth grade education for the Greensboro News & Record in North Carolina, found that an Arizona program which began selling healthier snacks throughout a few of their schools made the same amount of money whether the items sold were healthy or those considered unhealthy (37). Clearly, money is not a major issue involved in the attempt to change the lives of generations to come. Change does not come easy, and there are still other avenues that slow the process.

Not everyone is for altering food choices. Some children also challenge these motives. An article by Carey Reuters posted on the Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity website claimed that some students will choose not to eat new foods and will instead opt for those they are more familiar with, such as burgers and fries (sec. 2). Then again, if adolescents are not offered the opportunity to eat these types of food, there will be no problem. Plus, those students who choose to eat unwholesome snacks do not surpass those who do not, since the profits from vending machines have previously been proven to remain unaffected throughout these changes. Therefore, between an unbalanced diet, lack of exercise, and sources of

opposition, adolescents are becoming increasingly at risk for problems other than just weight gain.

### Medical Risks

Obese children suffer consequences due to their unhealthy lifestyles. This disorder can lead to serious medical problems, even those normally found in adults. An article by Jane Hoffler, a Tribune newspaper staff writer, states that being overweight can lead to diabetes, asthma, hypertension, and other dangerous illnesses for many children. She contends that “the higher a child’s weight is on the developmental curve, the more at-risk he or she is for complications” (38). This clearly supports the fact that a solution needs to come about quickly before the weight of a child gets out of hand. Sleep apnea, a condition where difficulty breathing occurs during sleep, is fairly common. This affliction can in turn affect children while at school because a lack of sleep will cause them to be more tired during the day, thus directly affecting the quality of their school work.

In addition to being sick while at a young age, “Overweight in Children,” a study by the American Heart Association, believes that overweight children have a strong possibility to carry this trait into adulthood (sec. 1). That means these conditions may worsen or the type of health problems present may become more severe. Overweight people incur substantial hospital and other medically related bills which can come to be very expensive over time. That means more money the government must also lose because they must cover some of these costs. Childhood obesity must be stopped when the person is still young to ensure that the risks of accompanying complications are considerably low.

### Emotional Risks

While medical issues can easily be expected, obese kids also risk experiencing a low quality of life in other forms. Not only can weight be a physical problem, but an emotional one as well. Overweight children are subject to being ostracized from their peers. Writer Darcia Browman studied surveys which found that the emotional state of overweight youth is equated with young cancer patients (sec. 5). These negative feelings are brought on by the fact that those who are overweight are normally bullied, teased, and are the brunt of cruel jokes on a daily basis. Depression and other mood disorders commonly arise as a result of these happenings. Especially in school settings, obese children may feel socially discriminated because of their size. All of the time spent in school settings makes this the place where they attain most of their social skills. Yet, to some kids, school is also a supporter of their pain. For that reason, steps must be taken to compel academic environments to take a role in lowering the depressing feelings of students and improve their quality of life.

Proposed Solutions: A Reduction in Size

Nutrition in Schools

A major component in the life of a child, a school has the power to alter customs that make their students unhealthy by changing their lunch menus to accommodate a healthier diet. Many cafeterias are already heading in this direction by changing the type of food served. In fact, the modifications of several cafeterias are being observed. In Fairfax, Virginia, some schools offered appealing foods that also held nutritional value (Buchanan 39). It is possible that schools can offer tasty foods to students while still enforcing dietary guidelines. In order to decrease the rate of obese children, these steps must be taken to ensure a healthier generation to come. Not only do cafeterias need to be adjusted, but so do other aspects of school dining.

Often times, students may eat a convenient lunch or snack from vending machines. These types of snacks contribute to the weight gain and overall lack of wellness for countless youth. Instead of the usual sodas and snacks high in sugar, these machines should be filled with juice, water, and other healthy food choices. The rest of the school must also be in sync with these types of restrictions.

While the greatest risk for eating foods low in nutrition is during lunch, there are other times during the day where opportunities lie for students to eat detrimental foods. Inside classrooms, teachers need to be banned from giving out candy to students as prizes. Instead, other forms of rewards should be given in its place, like fruit or other healthy snacks. Students could even be presented with other kinds of rewards instead of food, such as having special privileges, or receiving stickers, pencils, or other items depending on the age group. Sugar and fatty food intake must be reduced in order to make a change. Children must be introduced to better ways of living. Parents also play a role in the types of food eaten at school. For instance, when they bring in food for special days, such as birthday parties, there should be guidelines in place as to what foods are appropriate. Although each of these ideas will eventually benefit the well-being of numerous young children, there are other options that can be implemented.

### Physical Expectations in Schools

Because of the inactive lifestyle of many youth today, physical exercise standards must be enhanced. Physical education holds the same importance as other courses because it is improving the quality of life for the younger generation. It is important that obese children are involved in some type of daily physical training in order to decrease the likelihood of gaining more weight. Each child at every grade level should be required to take some form of an

exercise class. Children who do not participate in these classes will fail to move to the next grade level. These strict rules must be mandated to facilitate the process of decreasing high obesity rates. Researchers on obesity have concluded that “energy expenditure outside the home and at the playground was greater in obese than in the nonobese boys” (Ekvall et al. 167). This means that obese children actually lose more weight than their counterparts during physical activity. This is an important step towards achieving the goal, because working out will lead to fewer kids becoming overweight. While it is important for adolescents to take part in these classes, it is also important that teachers and parents be aware of how well students are responding to the changes.

A plan must be in place to view the progress of all children in the school systems. Fitness tests should be performed at least three times a year, during the beginning, middle, and end of school semesters, to assess the risk that a child has of being obese. Health report cards will be sent home to parents following these exams. This will help parents keep track of any improvements shown in their child. Children can also have the chance to view their progress overtime. These health reports should contain important information on obesity and will have specific information about each child, including percentages of the other children tested. NAPAHA, The National Association of Physical Activity and Health believe health report cards help parents realize that there may be a problem with their child and those who receive these types of facts often make moves to change the unhealthy lifestyle of their offspring (“Health Report”, par. 6). Parents have a huge impact on the life of their child, and their support will only improve the situation. Once people learn more about obesity and how it affects adolescents, the more they will be willing to prevent it from occurring. With the aid of a healthy diet, more youth will be on their way to a leading a longer life, free of complications due to their size.



## Disadvantages

As with any change, obstacles are almost certain to arise. By taking vending machines out of school, schools will lose some money. This is because these machines are normally filled with popular choices of food and drinks for students. Also, childhood obesity is a problem that requires joint cooperation between both the parents and the schools. If parents are not involved, then any efforts made are nearly futile. Some parents may not realize or be willing to recognize that being overweight is a serious problem for their child. Others may choose not to participate in the efforts of the schools because they may accept the fact that their child is large in size. Each of the disadvantages can be defeated by focusing on the positive outcomes of the situation.

## Advantages

While drawbacks are always present, the advantages heavily outweigh them. Reducing the rate of obesity will significantly limit the number of children who have illnesses due to being overweight. There will be a longer life expectancy since children will be less likely to develop serious health problems due to their weight. These medical problems also affect more than just the overweight person troubled by them. In Tennessee, “obesity-related problems cost the state \$1.2 billion a year” (“Tennessee Houses”, par. 5). The more severe the medical issue becomes, the more it costs states to cover medical expenses. Therefore, reducing the number of overweight children will also benefit the pockets of numerous citizens and the government. Since being overweight also has an effect on the psychological aspects of a child, there will be fewer cases of depression and other emotionally related issues. Furthermore, getting a healthy start in school may make these same customs appear in the home of overweight youth, specifically

because parents are being made aware that a problem exists. The children are the future, and their well-being is a top priority.

#### Conclusion: Balancing the Scales

Obesity is a disorder that has spread across nations, negatively affecting the life of many young people. In order to lower the high rates that the incident transpires, both schools and parents together must take certain precautions dealing with unhealthy foods and make children participate more frequently in exercise and other physical activities. Because children spend a large amount of time in academic settings, this is the one place that can have a big effect on their lifestyle. A change must come about to ensure that the children of today are healthy and in good shape for tomorrow.

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