

Parenting POWER

Setting the Stage

by Sarah Muntel, RD

Between work, your kids' schedules and the laundry that never seems to get finished – you have a packed schedule! It can be very easy to plop down on the couch and order pizza. Life is hard, people are stressed and time is short, so it can be difficult to fit in good nutrition and fitness into your day – but it's important that you do!

We all know that obesity is a disease and that people affected with obesity can suffer from many health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and sleep apnea – just to name a few. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the disease of obesity affects one third of the U.S. adult population. However, this is not a problem for adults only. Did you know that 17 percent of children in the U.S. are also affected by this disease? This number isn't a surprise with the popularity of video games, high calorie drinks and an abundance of sugar in kids' diets.

With childhood obesity as it stands, now is the time to focus on your kids. In this obesity epidemic, parents have the power and it's time to roll up our sleeves and work on the problem! This may be one of the most important things you do because moving toward improved health, and forming good behaviors early on, can lead to a lifetime of health. However, this task can seem overwhelming! In a world of cupcakes, computer games and fast food, it may seem that the deck is stacked against you – but it's not!

There are many small changes you can make to point your kids down the road of good health, and parents have the responsibility of beginning to instill a lifetime of healthy habits at an early age. This responsibility may sound serious, and that's because it is! Many factors can affect your child's health behaviors, so let's see what we can do.



1. Be a Role Model

First, take a hard look at your own health. How do you think you are doing with your nutrition and fitness plan? This may be a tough question to answer, but it is an important one. Did you know that you are your child's first role model? What you say and do early on can set the stage for a lifetime of healthy behaviors. What do your kids think when they see you going out for an early morning walk or packing a healthy lunch to bring to work? Without saying a word, you are sending the message that eating a healthy diet and fitness are important to you. That can be a very strong message for a child to hear.

If you are struggling with your own health journey, now is a good time to make changes. Your kids can be your biggest reason to prioritize health because the changes you make to your diet can trickle down and impact your family as well. Making healthy dinners, having fresh fruit available for snacks and going on evening walks will not only improve your health, but the health of your family as well. If there are some changes you need to make, start today! Your family and children will all be taking notes and following along.

Making fitness and health a priority can be a struggle, and parents can sometimes feel bad about taking time for their own selves to exercise. However, you shouldn't feel guilty about making your health a priority. Remember the old saying, "You can't pour from an empty cup?" This is so true! It's important to take care of yourself in order to promote health within your family. Leaving your kids at home to go on a quick run can be hard, but your kids will see that you are treating your health as a priority – and that is a very important lesson to learn!

2. Make Room for Them in Your Healthy Journey

Setting a good example is a great start, but then it's time to take it to the next level. Let's get the kids involved! Making your



kids a part of your health plan can encourage them to buy into the health journey. This part can take a little work, and sometimes, it can be faster and easier to do things without your child's help. However, this is your opportunity to teach them the skills that they will need in the long-term. As they begin joining you on your journey, you will begin to see them enjoying what they are doing.

Here are a few ways that you can include your children in your own health plan:

- Bring your toddler in a stroller while you walk a 5K
- Have your child set the table for dinner
- Plan meals together as a family
- Go on a family bike ride
- Have your child toss a salad for dinner
- Sign-up for a family 5K



Preparing and sitting down for family meals are also important. According to the United States Healthful Food Council (USHFC), the average American adult buys a meal or snack from a restaurant 5.8 times a week – and more than 30 percent of children eat fast food on any given day. These are scary statistics! Many studies show that families who eat

together will have kids who eat more healthy foods, who are less likely to be overweight and who are less likely to have disordered eating. Talk about a win! Several times during the week, try taking the time to enjoy your meals and your additional company. As you learn about each other's day, share stories and eat healthy food together, you'll be reaping many rewards!

3. Incorporate Healthy Learning Experiences

It's time to take this show on the road! Find ways to instill health knowledge in your kids by showing them first-hand where food comes from and why eating healthy is important. Knowledge is power, and some children think that food just shows up at a grocery store with no idea where it may come from. Food "field trips" can show your children where good nutrition comes from.

Here are a few tips that will help your children to have healthy learning experiences:

- Visit your local farmers market to see why locally grown vegetables and fruit may be a good option.
- Find different grocery stores that carry a variety of new foods. See vegetables and fruits that you may have never seen before. It's a great place to learn!



- Grow a vegetable garden to learn about the benefits of fresh produce.
- Check out books at the local library or find websites to learn about dairy farms, food processing plants or cattle farms.
- Teach nutrition to kids by evaluating the food label and determining what good choices are.

4. Teach Moderation

Repeat after me: "No one is perfect, and no one has a perfect diet." You can become stressed while trying to incorporate a perfect fitness and nutrition plan with your children. It's important to do the best you can and realize there is room for moderation and a treat every once in a while!



Removing temptations can be a great place to start. A cabinet full of sweets and chips can be very tempting, so try something else. Instead of having a container of ice cream from your freezer, take your kids out for an ice cream treat sporadically so they can enjoy it without being tempted all week long by the ice cream in your freezer.

Another strategy you can practice is to find substitutes for your family's favorite foods that may be a little healthier. Instead of frozen coffee drinks, for example, look for substitutes that work just as well such as substituting certain ingredients with Greek yogurt or Splenda. You can also try baked French fries instead of fast food fries for a healthier snack.



Putting it Together

At the end of the day, being a role model for your children is a big responsibility – but an important one! Take some time to assess where your family is and begin working on a plan for health. Take it one step at a time and build on it. Your kids will thank you one day, and you will find the journey quite rewarding!

About the Author:

Sarah Muntel, RD, is a Registered Dietitian and Bariatric Coordinator at Community Bariatric Surgeons in Indianapolis, IN. She has worked with bariatric surgery patients for 17 years and especially enjoys leading support groups. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her husband and three children.



Obesity Action Coalition

ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



PUBLIC EDUCATION



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VIBRANT COMMUNITY

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

**Through the OAC Community,
you can get access to:**

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
- Community Discussion Forum
- Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE

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