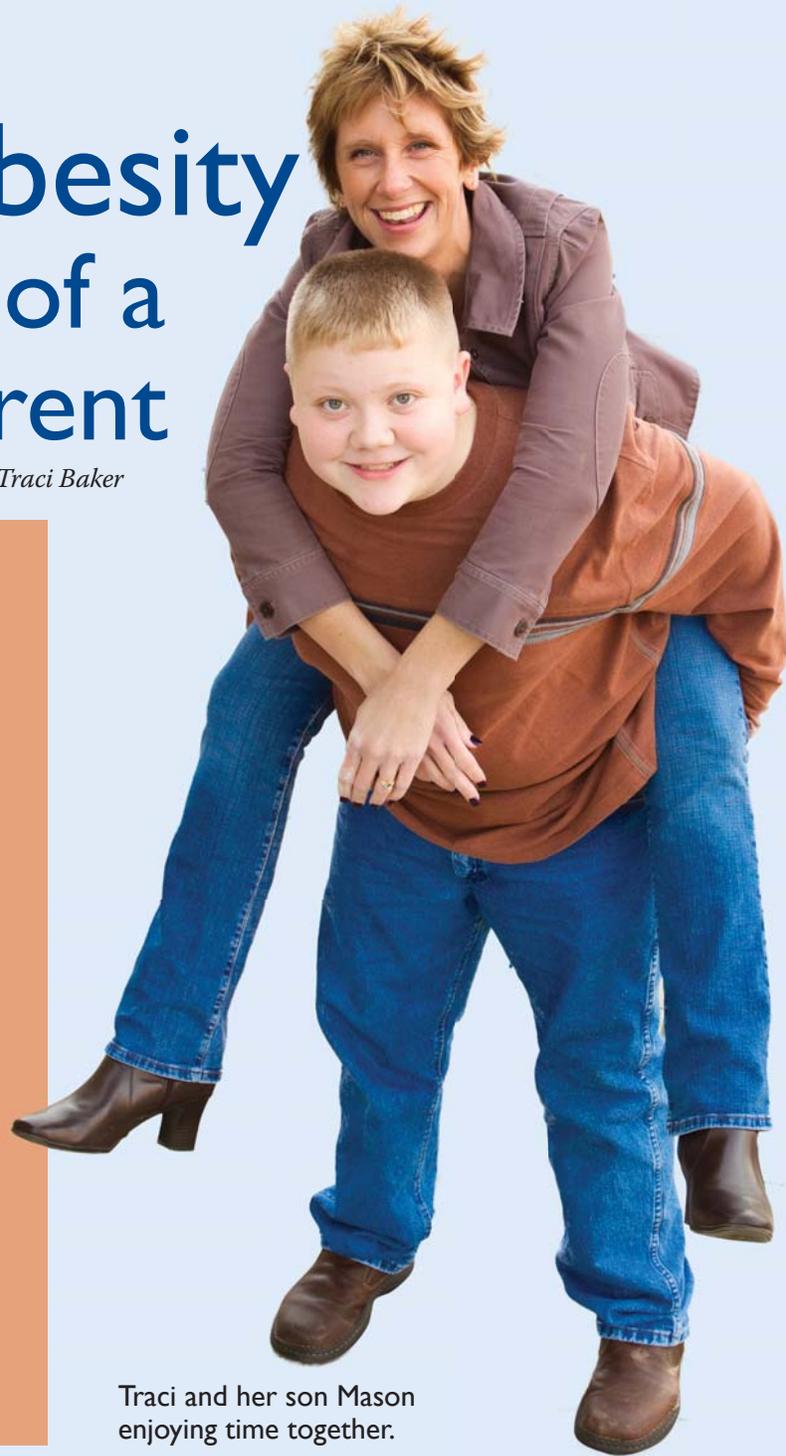


Childhood Obesity from the View of a Concerned Parent

by Traci Baker

In late 2011, the media covered various stories about children being removed from parental care due to childhood obesity. The OAC issued a statement on the impact of obesity as a factor in child neglect which can be read by visiting www.obesityaction.org. Upon releasing a statement, the OAC received feedback from members regarding this issue. One member, Traci Baker, who is a frequent author for Your Weight Matters Magazine, expressed that while it may seem easy for the government and the public to judge whether or not a child has been neglected due to their weight, the parental struggles of everyday life, especially in regards to weight and weight bias, are often overlooked or not addressed at all. Below, you will find an article written by Ms. Baker, which allows us to see a parent's perspective of raising a child affected by obesity.



Traci and her son Mason
enjoying time together.

Traci's Perspective

Becoming a parent has been one of the greatest joys in my life! As our children grow, we want the best for them, so we guide them through life's lessons in hopes that they do not have to face some of the struggles we did growing up. Unfortunately, there are times that no matter how much we prepare, those struggles that we fear are waiting just around the corner. That day came for me when I realized that lines had been crossed and my son was being bullied.

Realizing My Child was a Victim of Bullying

In the back of my mind, I think I always knew he would face weight stigma at some point, but a big part of me did not want to talk about it, in hopes that it would never come to life. I was teased and bullied growing up and that is something I never wanted him to experience. We have been dealing with bullying for the past four years on different levels, and each year I have prayed that it would stop, but it continues to worsen.

Watching my son experience weight bias at such a young age

puts me on a completely different emotional level. It is one thing to have personal experience, but when it started happening to my son, I found myself going into “mommy protective mode” to a point. I am responsible for his well-being and protection, and I am going to do the best that I can to protect him from harm.

Finding out that throughout the years he reached out to other adults who did not take the time to truly listen, instead telling him to stop tattling, just ignore it and get along with everyone, or that he was taking it the wrong way, tears me apart. When I look back, I remember him telling me about issues in school, in the bathroom and at recess.

I remember having the gut feeling that something was wrong, so I checked with his teachers about any issues and made them aware of the things he told me. I received positive feedback, saying they felt like everyone played together well and there were no issues. When I asked about the bathroom and recess time, I was assured that all areas, inside and outside of the school, had adults and teachers who monitored and did not allow this type of behavior. I entrusted that anyone working at the school had the best interest of all the kids at school in mind, including my own child. Then, one of the teachers said, “Oh you know it’s probably kids being kids. I’m sure they are just having fun.” My gut feeling did not agree, but her comment made me stop and wonder if I was just being overprotective, and I was reminded this was only third grade we are talking about.

Trying to Reach out for Help

When I reach out for help, I commonly get the same responses, such as, “Maybe if you taught him to eat healthier foods and not so much junk food and become more active, he would not be overweight.” When I explain that he is constantly running around the neighborhood, riding his bike and playing hard, and that he loves to eat chicken, salads, veggies and fruit, it is like they do not believe me. I tell them I do not feed him a lot of junk food and the immediate response is, “Well, if he’s not getting it from you, then who is giving it to him?” The assumption is always there, that his weight is because of junk food. I get to a point where they make me feel like I am a bad parent.

The Problem Worsened

When things started happening again, he did not say anything at first, but my gut told me something was wrong. After continually asking and getting the same response, I focused on approaching him in a “non-mom like” manner and on a different level. What I discovered was at some point, when the teasing and bullying became worse, he did not tell anyone because he felt like they did not believe him. He had lost his trust in adults. In some

respect, we both have struggled with non-existent or negative feedback which made us feel alone at different times.

The teasing/bullying/ridicule and comments start from the time he gets on the bus for school, to the time he comes in the house at the end of the day. It affects his self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence, grades, social interactions and trust in adults. It worries me knowing how this will affect him as he grows into a teenager and an adult.

My Struggles as a Parent

I worry about not saying enough, saying too much, putting him in counseling at a young age and if that would scare him, when to bring his teachers into it, how to do the right thing, but not embarrass him, the list goes on. I try to find the happy medium to make sure he gets what he needs, and not be an overprotective parent that only causes more ridicule for him.

One of my biggest struggles is knowing how to honestly comfort him by letting him know that everything will be okay when I know that these next few years in junior and senior high school that it will continue on a different level. His body is changing rapidly from puberty, which brings opportunities for more ridicule. Knowing that his future includes gym classes and showers in the locker room means taking down some of the layers he uses to hide his physical being.

Conclusion

We are a society that is taught to criticize and judge by physical appearances – showing what the norm is and those who do not fit that description face weight bias and stigma every day. I can raise him to look at the world differently and do the right thing, but I cannot control those outside forces he is facing and it breaks my heart knowing that his struggles are not over.

My son means the world to me and in my heart, I know I am perfectly imperfect as a mom, but in no way am I a bad parent or neglectful. Everyone deserves to live a life without weight bias.

About the Author:

Traci Baker is a professional in the field of bariatrics at the IU Health Bariatric & Medical Weight Loss. She is also the president of Bariatric Life Coach Association, LLC, where she works as a certified life coach specializing in working with all weight-loss patients. She is a support group leader, patient advocate, member of the OAC and serves on the OAC's Advocacy Committee.



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.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

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**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition

@ObesityAction