



Combating Childhood Obesity through Nutrition and Training

In the United States today, childhood obesity is reaching epidemic proportions. Rather than reiterate the same statistics that you read in every article about this topic, we'd like to address the ways in which we can affect change in the lives of our children and grandchildren before they are faced with the inevitable health issues that will likely result from poor nutritional and fitness habits.

What can we do? A lot! The American Council on Exercise (ACE) has designated their resources and expertise to help us improve as families and our country's youth via a program called "Operation FITKIDS" (visit www.OperationFitKids.org for more information). They list the "10 Components of a Healthy & Balanced Lifestyle," which is a no-nonsense, comprehensive checklist of things that you can do to improve your child's health and fitness level.

If your child is already overweight and is inactive, the first step is to make the necessary changes to his or her diet. Then, it's a matter of inspiring little Bobby or Suzy to get moving. With regard to the latter, I'd like to correct a common misconception regarding strength training for kids. Many parents believe that children should wait until the age of 12 to begin any strength training program because implementing a program at a younger age will stunt their child's growth. The truth is that there is simply no evidence to support this statement.

In fact, all of the major fitness and medical organizations in the U.S. recommend strength training for youth, assuming that basic guidelines are adhered to and appropriate leadership is present. Children can begin to train with weights as soon as they are able to accept and follow directions - typically around the age of eight or 10.

The benefits of youth strength training are similar to those for adults, including an improved attitude toward lifelong activity. Improvements in muscular fitness, bone mineral density, body composition, motor fitness performance and injury resistance are compelling evidence for all parents. To keep your child motivated, present ideas that support their efforts like self-improvement and individual success. But no matter what, make sure that your child is having fun!

Another compelling argument for youth strength-training programs is that significant improvements have been seen in self-esteem, mental discipline and socialization. Weight training provides an opportunity to let children who typically struggle with group activities stand out from their classmates and perform well on an individual basis. Overweight and obese children tend to have great muscular strength and tend to excel in that area. What a tremendous way to boost self-esteem in the children who need it most!

How do you get started? Listen very closely to your child's concerns and address them with care. Kids love to learn new



things, so working with medicine balls, resistance bands, free weights and machines is a great idea and can be lots of fun! Finally, remember that your goals when exercising with children are simple: Safety, fun and learning to love being physically fit!

As far as nutrition goes, relax parents. Once you get Bobby & Suzy moving, the food thing will come. Who shops? If the answer is you, the adult, then it's up to you to offer your child better choices. If nutritionally unsound food choices aren't available, your child can't eat it. If you kid yourself that you're buying Coco Puffs for Bobby or Suzy, but really it's you that wants the sugary cereal, then we have a different issue on our hands altogether.

Instead of going crazy and cutting out all those treats that your child loves all at once, start out slowly. Little consistent changes will not be met with as much resistance. Make a family decision to improve on the types and amount of food you're buying and preparing. Healthy choices can be convenient too, you just have to make the decision to improve yours and your families' nutrition and stay committed to that decision. Just Decide. **HB**

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