

Challenge your children to make healthier choices

By Robert B. Gilbertson Jr., Jerry Beavers and Bob Ecklund
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When is the last time you exercised with your child?

According to the latest statistics, the answer for most families is, "Not recently."

If the question were, "When's the last time your child played a video game?", the answer would much more likely be, "Today."

The most evident consequence of our sedentary lifestyle is a significant increase in child and adult obesity. Being obese in childhood increases the risk of adult obesity; the more obese a child, the more obese he or she is likely to be as an adult.

Consider:

The average child in this country spends 14 hours per week watching television and seven hours playing video games;

In 2004, 17 percent of children ages 2-19 were overweight, and the proportion of youth who are overweight is increasing;

Despite the proven benefits of exercise, more than 50 percent of American adults do not get enough physical activity to provide health benefits, and 26 percent are not active at all in their leisure time.

Our own state has equally scary statistics:

Obesity rates for adults in Washington have more than doubled between 1990 (9 percent) and 2004 (22 percent);

Nearly 11 percent of our state's youth ages 10-17 are overweight;

Obesity affects children in lower-income brackets and children of color at higher rates.

The good news is this trend can be stopped -- and even reversed -- through lifestyle changes, especially by increasing physical activity.

Our research at the YMCA on lifestyle health transformation shows that children and adults can successfully stop weight gain. By working with families, we have learned that reversing the obesity trend is possible when people are given small, simple targets to get started.

Begin by taking 2,000 more steps and eating 100 fewer calories each day.

Parents are the best models of healthy behavior for their children. Involving your whole family in good fitness and dietary habits reinforces those routines in children, and once kids make the changes, they often keep pressure on the rest of the family to stay on course.

One of the easiest ways to take more steps is to make walking with your family a game. Kids love competition, and they love keeping track of their success.

Wear pedometers during family walks to parks or through your neighborhood and when you return, add up everyone's steps. Play a game by guessing how many steps it will take to walk a certain distance. When kids are challenged to count their steps, they significantly increase their activity levels.

Another simple step toward preventing weight gain is eating just 100 fewer calories each day. This can be achieved by replacing soda with water or choosing one healthier snack of fruit or vegetables each day.

We hope you'll get your family started on these simple healthy steps immediately, and, when someone asks, "When is the last time you exercised with your child?" you'll say, "Today."

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Snohomish County and YMCA of Tacoma-Pierce County, respectively (www.pugetsoundymcas.org). "America on the Move Week with the YMCA" is taking place this week.