

# Challenges of Parents to Address Obesity in Children

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## INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, obesity prevalence has increased in both adults and the young all over the world. The increased prevalence of obesity among adults is associated with a rise in the number of obese children [1]. The International Association for the Study of Obesity and the International Obesity Taskforce (IASO/IOTF 2010) estimates that up to 150 million school-aged children are overweight and 40-50 million are obese. In the European Union, approximately 60% of adults and over 20% of school-aged children are either overweight or obese. In America, 16.3% of children aged 2 to 19 are obese, and an additional 15.6% are overweight [2]. In Australia, one in four children aged 5-16 years are to be overweight. In South Africa, approximately 10% of children are overweight [3], while in UK 27.3% of children aged 2 to 10 years are either overweight or obese [4].

The limited level of awareness of parents is a major cause of concern for public health professionals [5]. Some parents dismiss obesity by assuming that their children are healthy, while those who knew a little about obesity were unable to take appropriate action due to lack of knowledge [6]. The National Health Service (England) in their 2009 report acknowledged childhood obesity as one of the most serious medical problems of the western world, accounting for over 9,000 deaths a year [7]. The report further cautions that childhood obesity should not be overlooked or dismissed as “puppy fat” because it is a strong indicator that obese children may grow up to become obese adults with serious health risk in later life.

## CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF OBESITY

The risk factors associated with obesity are maternal obesity, metabolic syndrome, genetic predisposition, hormonal problems chemotherapy, and family lifestyle.

In a study, Whitaker inferred that mothers of low education status were three times likely to misidentify their children as overweight or obese

than educated mothers, parents’ lack of trust for “growth chart” as an accurate way of measuring and the inability of parents to acknowledge that their children are obese [8].

Unhealthy messages from food advertisements directed at children, especially those advertisements that portray eating snack at non-meal times as healthy may play a role in the growing epidemic of childhood obesity. Lack of physical activity and increased consumption of foods high in fat and sugar at school may also be a culprit in increasing childhood obesity [9].

The role of parents in childhood obesity is somewhat complicated. While lack of awareness or recognition of overweight or obesity as a health problem in children by parents may be partly responsible, the mere mistrust of information they get from the media and the presence of obese parents double the risk of childhood obesity [10]. A study of knowledge, awareness, behavior and perception revealed that some parents acknowledged causes of overweight and obesity, the strategies of healthy family lifestyle like physical activity, healthy eating and parental role modeling, but were unable to name incentives for bringing about the practical behavior change within the family [11].

## PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGY

There is a need for a more effective public health campaign to increase awareness about increasing rate of obesity among children, increasing parent knowledge of the epidemic and equipping them with knowledge of strategies that can improve eating habit and parental lifestyle practices. Parents should be encouraged to encourage their children to be physically active and discourage singling out overweight and obese children during eating, playing or other healthy activities.

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