

Why Are Our Kids

FEAR



By Kristin Wehrli, Scholastic

# FAT

Health campaigns target bad eating habits and a sedentary lifestyle, but there's a missing piece to the puzzle of childhood obesity: emotional issues, stress and parents who aren't teaching kids coping mechanisms so they don't soothe with food.

**Y**ou can't turn on a TV or read a newspaper over the past few years without hearing the call to arms against childhood obesity.

And it's no wonder.

The prevalence of obesity among children ages 6 to 11 jumped from 6.5 percent in 1980 to 19.6 percent in 2008. And among adolescents, it's 18.1 percent – up from 5 percent. In short, kids today are three times more likely to be obese than 30 years ago, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

It's that sobering statistic that prompted first lady Michelle Obama to launch the Let's Move campaign, which educates kids and families on the importance of physical exercise and healthful eating. The hope is to stem the tide of obesity that could easily cause our national healthcare costs to soar out of control.

But there's an important part of this discussion that sometimes is overlooked. That is, what's the root cause of overeating and lack of exercise?

Many psychological factors can drive kids to "self-soothe" with food. A high divorce rate and prevalent single parenthood can leave kids to fend for themselves. Today's food-industry behemoths exploit our nutritional ignorance, promoting unhealthy processed foods for profit.

"There are different reasons why kids overeat," says psychologist Keith Levick,

whose Center for Childhood Weight Management in Farmington Hills has been on the cutting edge of this field for a quarter of a century.

"It could be an emotional issue," he says. "When we feel bad, some of us turn to things that make us feel good, and food is intrinsically rewarding. It becomes habitual, unhealthy links in a behavioral chain. Throw in emotional factors like stress – humans are stress eaters; we're the only animal that eats when we're not physiologically hungry."

Indeed, our kids today are more stressed than ever. University of Michigan assistant professor of pediatrics Julie Lumeng studies the patterns and effects of stress-eating in children.

"This is a missing link that no one looks at," she says.

"There is stress in every demographic, every population. It's not the baseline stress you experience; it's how you're able to cope

with stress. In a more advantaged population, you might be better positioned to give your children tools to cope with stress."

## DEFINING OBESITY

Obesity is the result of caloric imbalance – too few calories expended for the amount consumed. Genetic, behavioral and environmental factors create a propensity – or lack thereof – for becoming overweight.

According to the CDC, there are lifelong effects of being overweight. Obese youth are more likely to be at-risk for cardiovascular disease. Children who are obese are at greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and social and psychological problems. Obese youth are more likely to become overweight or obese adults, at increased risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, several cancers and osteoarthritis.

A study revealed that children at age 3 who throw tantrums over food are more likely to be obese by the age of 9. Lumeng says a number of studies have shown that children with "difficult temperaments" – a child who has a harder time calming down when upset, who is moody or gets upset easily – is also more likely to be obese.

"If you're a child who has difficulty regulating emotion," Lumeng asks, "is it possible you're more likely to turn to food to calm yourself than another child who is easygoing?"

Upon launching her Let's Move program last February, first lady Michelle Obama recognized the importance of preventing childhood obesity. "The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake," she said.

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#### Laugh to alleviate stress

Instead of feeding children high-calorie treats, parents can instead help them naturally relieve stress with a dose of family silliness. Visit MetroParent.com for some gut-busting ideas to laugh their worries away.

# FAT

Since taking office in January of 2009, Mrs. Obama has made childhood health a priority and is using her status to inspire children and families to eat healthier and get more exercise.

Those are two easy answers to a problem that has been raging for decades. The motivating factors behind the obesity epidemic, though, are harder to resolve.

Granted, nutrition education is a huge component. Six years ago when Danialle Karmanos was touring The Children's Center in Detroit, she gasped when she saw a 15-year-old mother feeding her infant a bottle of Coca-Cola.

"It's not her fault," Karmanos realized and was inspired to create "Danialle Karmanos Work It Out," a program in urban schools and community centers that offers nutrition education and yoga classes for children ages 7 to 12. In five years, Work It Out has taught more than 1,200 kids about making healthy choices.

"I could assume (the mother's) thinking was 'I like Coke, I want my baby to be happy, I'll give my baby Coke,'" Karmanos says. "I was thinking also about the healthcare costs of five, 10, 15 years of preventable heart care, cancers and diabetes."

Although Work It Out didn't start out to be a yoga-based program, it evolved into one — because teaching yoga empowers kids with a fitness modality that's affordable, mobile and gives them a way to remain calm in high-stress situations.

"The kids we work with live with tremendous amounts of stress," says Karmanos. "Their life is almost a perpetual stream of stress."

## WHAT'S CAUSING ALL THIS STRESS?

"When you have a 50 percent divorce rate (and) more single-parent families than ever before, a child can't control what mom and dad are going to do," says Levick. "But he can control what goes into his mouth."

"For some kids, overeating is a form of rebellion or secondary gain. If their needs aren't met and they become obese, they have physiological problems or social issues. Now, mom and dad are involved — and they're getting attention they didn't get before."

Socioeconomics plays a part in the stress factor, too. While stress is pervasive and not relegated to low-income neighborhoods, Lumeng points out that more outlets for dealing with stress are available in higher-income locales.

"In a lower-income population, if it's a single parent, the mom's working a 40-hour-a-week job (and) sleeps during the day to work the night shift," Lumeng says. "Her ability to help her child cope with stress is limited, and that may be the way she was raised. In lower-income communities, fast food is prevalent, more promoted — and there are often unsafe neighborhoods and kids can't exercise as much."

Jamii Hitchcock, principal of Norup International School in Oak Park, has noticed that in more affluent school districts, students lead a much healthier lifestyle.

Hitchcock has worked in three Oakland County districts and has seen "much healthier

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choices than what my husband sees as an administrator in Detroit."

She agrees that stress is pervasive.

"Kids are under a lot of stress," she says. "Our society is under a great amount of stress and, unfortunately, we're unable to protect kids from the stress we're under. It manifests in a number of ways. We have to do a better job and, as educators, help our parent community."

Society, Karmanos says, is overstimulated. "Everyone's attention span is so short. Our

society expects immediate gratification. If we want potato chips, we eat them. We don't say, 'It'll ruin your dinner.'"

## FOOD AND EXERCISE

It's important to remember the simple truths of childhood obesity: We eat too much, we eat bad foods and we don't exercise enough.

"Families don't know how to eat in a

healthy way, which contributes to 66 percent of adults being overweight," says Levick.

Karmanos agrees. "There are more fast-food restaurants, but even going to the grocery store, you can't walk to the produce section without walking past potato chips and candy," she says. "There could be an easy scapegoat in some of the big companies and their marketing strategies and how they target kids, but that's been going on for a long time — Cocoa Puffs were around when I was a kid."

Plus, Karmanos points out, people are confused about what their kids should or shouldn't eat. "Someone in my family bought my boys canned fruit for a snack, and they said, 'Don't worry; it has no sugar in it,'" she says. "They can't eat it because 'no sugar' means it has artificial sweeteners. Our bodies weren't designed to process chemicals. The best thing is to feed kids a healthy, clean diet, but for a lot of kids that's not a reality."

Many kids have no access to or can't afford fresh, local, chemical-free produce or unadulterated foods — and many don't even realize they're an option. Processed, junky foods are cheap and readily available.

Add to that a dearth of exercise, and it's easy to understand how we got here.

"When we were kids, we played outside until the streetlights went out," says Levick. "Today, going out is a punishment."

Children today watch an average of 24 hours of TV a week, plus another 24 hours of computer time, social media, video games and text messaging.

Kids — and adults — spend more time than ever before sitting around.

"We don't move," says Levick. "Been to the airport? Get on the conveyor. Clap your hands and the lights go on or off. The epitome of laziness: You don't even have to suck on a breath mint anymore; put that thing on your tongue and it dissolves. You don't even have to flush the toilet. It'll do it for you."

Studies show that watching TV puts viewers in "a semi-conscious state," says Levick. "People eat five times more food while watching television than while not watching television."

Video games, TV and other sedentary activities lead to "mindless eating," says Karmanos. "Healthy eating is sitting down and having a family meal. Mindful eating is being aware of what you're snacking on. Ideally, that's well-portioned, healthy choices

what their mom packed for them. When there's mindless eating, you're not processing what you're consuming."

## WAKE UP, PARENTS!

"We need to help parents recognize when a child is stress-eating," says Lumeng. "When the child says, 'I'm hungry,' the parent has to have a critical eye." Sometimes, fatigue, thirst or emotions are mistaken for hunger.

"For some mothers, it raises issues. Mothers will say, 'I'm not going to deny my child food when they say they're hungry.'" Even adults eat when they're not hungry, Lumeng says, and it takes great willpower to restrict one's own consumption.

But it's more than that. "If you look at the healthcare costs we're going to incur — because childhood obesity leads to preventable cancers, heart disease, and diabetes — how are we as a society not collectively infuriated by that?" Karmanos asks. "To think these kids are going to be in hospitals in five or 10 years because we didn't do anything? It's maddening."

"Heart disease is traced to early childhood," says Levick. "Diabetes in children is epidemic. By the age of 3, we're finding fat deposits in aortas and, by adolescence, in coronary arteries. We now have evidence that it's never too early to start preventing obesity — even in the womb. An overweight mother has a greater chance of having an overweight child."

If it's parents' jobs to protect their children, then they need to realize that in addition to suffering poor physical health, overweight and obese children are likely to be targets of early and systematic social discrimination.

Psychological stress, social stigmatization and low self-esteem — all results of obesity can hinder academic and social success and create lifelong challenges.

"It starts with parents," says Jordan Levin, director of the Jordan Levin Childhood Obesity Foundation in Keego Harbor. "If parents don't practice good eating or exercise regularly, how can you expect the child to know what to do?" **MP**

— *Lynne Meredith Schreiber is a single mother of three whose work has appeared in *Cooking Light*, *Parents*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Poets & Writers*. She blogs at [www.lynneschreiber.com](http://www.lynneschreiber.com).*