



FOOD and FITNESS MATTER:

Raising Healthy, Active Kids

Companion Guide for Parent Leaders and Educators



www.parentsaction.org



A Companion Guide for Parent Leaders and Educators

A Letter from Parents' Action for Children

Every day there is a new story in the news media about childhood obesity. It is one of the most serious health problems for our nation's children. Parents know that there is plenty they can do at home to prevent childhood obesity: they can be positive role models, provide healthy food for their families, and incorporate fitness into their lifestyles.

But this isn't just about what parents do at home: there is a complex mix of factors (economic, social and cultural) that contribute to the childhood obesity problem in this country. Parents need the support of their children's schools and communities, as well as policymakers, to reverse this national trend.

How do we get the support that we need? We need to stay informed, and speak up with our concerns and opinions. We know what's best for our children, so our voices are needed in the movement to improve nutrition and increase opportunities for physical activity in schools.

I applaud the PTA's long history as a leader in supporting and encouraging parental involvement. It takes a lot to reach diverse groups of parents, all of whom are busy with the daily challenges of parenting, but parents are a critically important constituency. An informed, involved group of parents can lead the way to positive changes in our schools, our communities, and our nation.

Norman Rosenberg
Parent' Action for Children President and CEO

Introduction

The *Food and Fitness Matter: Raising Healthy, Active Kids* video was designed to engage parents in efforts to prevent childhood obesity. The video paints a very real picture of the childhood obesity crisis, its impact on our children's health, and the multiple factors that brought us to this point. But it also offers parents solutions and ideas for simple things they can do in their own lives and communities.

This manual is for parent leaders, educators, service providers, health professionals and other community leaders who want to use *Food and Fitness Matter* to engage parents in efforts to prevent childhood obesity. It includes an overview of the issues covered in the video, as well as suggested questions for discussion and handouts to distribute to parents. We invite you to use this video and manual to get parents talking and learning. Many parents may be aware of the child obesity problem because of the extensive media coverage it has received, but they may not realize how serious the problem is, or that there are steps they can take to address it. In addition, many parents do not realize that poor nutrition and lack of physical activity affect all kids, even those who are not overweight.

We recommend showing the video in forums such as PTA or PTO meetings, house parties, moms' groups, dads' groups, or other parent gatherings. If you are a parent and know other parents concerned about poor nutrition and the lack of physical activity in your child's school, viewing the video to jumpstart a discussion is a perfect galvanizing activity for a first meeting to learn more about this issue and how to make an impact. *Food and Fitness Matter* is a vehicle for change. It gives parents information needed to make a difference.

Renu Mansukhani, M.D.
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What's the Problem:

An Overview of Childhood Obesity

This section highlights main points from the following chapters of the Food and Fitness Matter DVD:

Childhood Obesity: A Serious Health Crisis
Marketing to our Children: The Sweet Sell
The Effect on our Children's Health

Childhood obesity is one of the most serious health problems facing our country today. Obesity has potentially devastating consequences for our youth and our society as a whole.

Main Points to Highlight

Life for families today is hectic—children can no longer walk to school; breakfast is often skipped and meals often consist of fast foods eaten on the fly.

Homework, activities, and media such as TV, the internet and video games leave little time of inclination for kids to play outside and be physically active.

Our children are eating worse than ever—huge portions of processed, and fat and sugar-laden foods—in large part due to the big business of junk food and its marketing to kids.

The scope of the epidemic is huge and costly, both in dollars and in terms of our kids' health.

Poor nutrition is bad for non-overweight kids too—it can impact their growth and development for life.

The problems are worse in poor communities and in communities of color, but all children are affected. This generation of children is the first in centuries that is expected to have a lower life expectancy than their parents.

Questions for Discussion

Were you surprised by any of the facts about childhood obesity that were presented in the video?

As parents, what challenges do you face in trying to ensure that your children live healthy lifestyles?

Why Are So Many Kids Today Overweight? What Every Parent Needs To Know

The number of overweight or “obese” children in the United States is growing at an alarming rate. According to the Institute of Medicine, today there are twice as many preschoolers and three times as many children ages 6–11 who are obese as there were 25 years ago. There are now 9 million children over the age of 6 who are obese. Alarmingly, studies show that as a result of diseases like type 2 diabetes and heart disease that are related to being overweight, children today may not live as long as their parents. The good news is with some work we may be able to prevent this from happening. But first we have to understand how we got here.

Why are so many children overweight? There are two main reasons that overweight has become such a problem for our children: poor diet and lack of physical activity. These issues need to be addressed in our homes, schools, and communities, and involves multiple factors in today’s hectic lifestyle.

At home: Unhealthy foods like soda, fast food and processed, packaged foods are often more easily available and cheaper than healthy foods. Many communities do not have easy access to grocery stores that sell a wide variety of nutritious food, including high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products (recommended for children over 2) and whole grains.

Our kids’ lives have become too focused on sedentary activities. Children today have more TVs, DVD players, and video game consoles in their homes than ever before. According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation report, one in four children over the age of eight lives in a home with 5 or more TVs. The more TV kids watch, the more likely they are to be overweight. TV not only takes time away from physical activity, such as playing outside, but also exposes children to commercials targeted at them that promote unhealthy food.

Other reasons our children are not as physically active as they should be include: Many neighborhoods are too dangerous for kids to be outside to play, and fewer children walk or bike to school

At school: Junk food is available in most schools. Although there are requirements that food provided by programs like the National School Lunch Program meet strong nutritional guidelines, the standards for other food available on school grounds, such as what is sold in vending machines, are outdated -- so a lot of junk foods can be sold, and some healthier choices cannot. Candy bars are allowed for example, but seltzer water is not. Nutrition groups are pushing Congress to update these laws.

Children also are not getting enough physical activity at school. Many states have no requirements for physical education, or even recess. When funding for schools is cut, these programs are often the first to go.

If parents are overweight, won’t their kids be too? How much of childhood obesity is just due to genes? The Institute of Medicine reports that having overweight parents does increase a child’s risk of being obese. But this has to do only partly with genes. The multiple factors in a child’s environment are much more important. We cannot change our children’s genes, but as parents we can focus on the most important part we play in their environment: that of role models. If we make an attempt to eat healthy and be active, there is a good chance our kids will try too.

What we can do? All of these factors acting against children’s health may seem overwhelming. But parents, schools, and communities can work together to help children eat a healthy diet, be active, and maintain a healthy weight.

Reality Check: A Fact Sheet on Childhood Obesity

Some Facts about Our Children's Lives...

In 1999–2000, the number-one most consumed food item by children was carbonated beverages like soda pop.

The percentage of children's diets consumed in restaurants (including fast food) went from 6.5 percent in 1977 to 19.3 percent in 1996. Children consume almost twice the number of calories during a typical restaurant meal as compared to a meal from home.

Food and drink companies spend on average 15 billion dollars a year on advertisements that target children. The average child sees 40,000 commercials a year, and more than half of these ads are for unhealthy foods like candy, soda pop and fast foods.

Less than 25% of children get at least 30 minutes of physical activity per day.

Poor nutrition, even in non-overweight children, can affect brain development and performance in school.

...And our National Childhood Obesity Epidemic

Almost one-third of all children ages 6–19 are considered overweight or at risk for being overweight.

According to the Institute of Medicine, there are 9 million children over the age of 6 who are obese. There is a 70 percent chance that an overweight adolescent will be overweight or obese as an adult.

Obesity is associated with diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, depression, breast cancer and arthritis.



Starting at Home: What Can Parents Do?

This section highlights the main points from the “Starting at Home” chapter of the Food and Fitness Matter DVD. This section covers simple things that parents can do to improve children’s nutrition and wellness, starting at home.

Main Points to Highlight

Start early:

Mothers-to-be can begin by taking care of them selves during pregnancy.

If possible, breast feed your child from the start. Children who are breast fed are less likely to become overweight in the future.

As children get older:

Give kids healthy options and let them choose which one they want. Given healthy choices, kids will usually eat what they need. Don’t make your kids finish everything on their plate—this can lead to overeating later in life.

Juice often has the same amount of sugar as soda. Limit kids’ juice intake to half a cup a day. Cut soda out of your kids’ diet if possible—one soda a day for a year can lead to 10 extra pounds.

Don’t use food as a reward. Reward your kids with fun activities like going to the park or playground. And take walks with your kids. Make physical activity part of your health plan too.

Some tips from featured celebrity chef and nutrition advocate Jamie Oliver:

- Make a weekly grocery list and talk to your kids about exchanging a junk food item they want for a healthier one.
- Aim for a few home-cooked meals a week.
- Don’t get into battles over food with your kids. Try to lighten things up and make food fun.
- Encourage your whole family to try new things.

As a parent, if you eat healthy and exercise, chances are your kids will too.

If you are worried that your child is overweight, see your health care provider. Early prevention is a lot better than waiting until there is a problem.

Questions for Discussion

What do you think some of the challenges will be in implementing the suggestions in the video? For example, how easy/hard is it for you to cook dinner and eat together as a family? What are some ways of dealing with those challenges?

Do you have any ideas/tips for other parents on how to get kids to eat healthy and be more physically active?

What's the Big Deal about Breakfast?

Does your family skip breakfast? If so, you are not alone. As our society has become more mobile, with parents and kids having multiple commitments, we often skip this meal altogether. Over the past twenty years the United States has seen a steady decrease in the number of children who eat breakfast. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that 90 percent of one to five year-olds eat breakfast. By the time they are teenagers, just 14 percent consume breakfast.

Why is breakfast so important?

Breakfast plays a crucial and beneficial role in our children's health. Children who eat breakfast have a higher intake of vitamins and calcium and therefore are more likely to meet the government's recommendations for nutrients than children who skip breakfast. Research has shown that regardless of income, children who eat breakfast eat a better variety of foods in general, as well as more grains, fruit products, and milk, and they consume less saturated fat.

Does eating breakfast help kids perform better in school?

Studies have shown that not having breakfast may interfere with learning. Breakfast consumption does improve school attendance and has a positive effect on the overall nutritional quality of a child's diet. Research has also shown that students who eat breakfast have higher reading and math scores, and improved memory.

Will skipping breakfast help a child lose weight?

Despite what you might think, studies have found that children who skip breakfast are at greater risk for being overweight. This may be because they get so hungry later that they end up overeating. It is better for kids to eat three small or moderately sized meals a day and snacks between. Eating this way helps a child's body process food more efficiently than if the child were to eat one or two large meals a day.

Encourage your child to eat School Breakfast!

School Breakfast provides students with at least one-fourth of the recommended levels for key nutrients. Currently 8.7 million children in 78,000 schools nationwide participate in this program. Children who participate in the School Breakfast Program have better nutritional intake than those who do not. In addition, participation in School Breakfast has been shown to:

- Improve standardized test scores
- Improve attendance
- Decrease tardiness
- Improve participation in class

Any child can eat these meals, and it's easy to find out from your principal's office whether you qualify for a discount. Some schools even offer School Breakfast for free to everyone. In other schools, the maximum price is usually under \$1.50!

What to Pack: Lunchbox Ideas

There are many easy-to-pack, healthy foods that kids like. Note: If you are packing a lunch that will be eaten later in the day, make sure you use a cool pack to keep foods fresh. Meats, dressings and dairy, especially, must be kept cold to prevent spoiling.

Proteins

Use a variety of lean meats, such as sliced turkey, chicken breast. Other good sources of protein are peanut butter, low-fat cheese, hard-boiled eggs, hummus or edamame (fresh soybeans).

Grains

Use whole-wheat bread for sandwiches. If your child is tired of sandwich bread, try whole-wheat pocket or pita bread, tortilla wraps, rice cakes or grain salads, such as couscous.

Dressing

Try mustard, light mayonnaise, or hummus as a spread. If your child likes butter, try tub margarine. Salsa also makes a great dressing.

Fruit

Always include a fruit or vegetable in every meal and as snacks as much as possible. Use any fresh fruit, unsweetened applesauce, or fruit cocktail cups (packed in 100% fruit juice). Keep it interesting by choosing different fruits on occasion—for example, star fruit, kiwi, or papaya.

Vegetables

Use all the colors! Pack an assortment of carrot sticks, cherry tomatoes, green and red pepper strips, celery with peanut butter, broccoli or cauliflower florets with light dressing. You can mix up a medley of cooked vegetables and stuff them in pocket bread. If you add lettuce to a sandwich, remember to dry it well after washing it or you'll have a soggy sandwich.

Dairy products

Jazz up low-fat yogurt with fresh fruit or low-fat granola. Send string cheese.

Beverages

- Water or seltzer water
- Low-fat (1% or skim) milk for children over 2, whole milk for children under 2
- 100 % fruit juice
- Stay away from sweetened soft drinks, fruit punch, and juices that do not say "100% fruit juice"

Snack ideas

- Fresh fruit or dried fruit
- Whole-wheat pretzels, whole-grain crackers, rice cakes, air-popped popcorn or baked chips
- Low-fat yogurt or cottage cheese
- Instead of candy or cookies, offer trail mix or granola.
- Peanut butter and celery sticks
- Baby carrots or carrot sticks

Eating Out with Your Kids: Finding Healthier Options

For today's busy families, eating out is a chance for parents to take time off from meal planning, cooking, and cleaning. But finding a place that's kid-friendly and nutritious can be difficult. Many kids' meals at popular family restaurants are too high in sodium and calories. These meals also tend to contain dangerous trans fat, which contributes to obesity and heart disease.

Here are some tips to help you and your family eat healthier when you're out:

Look out for the extras.

Kids' menus often offer a free soda or dessert with every entrée. This can add hundreds of calories without adding any nutrition to the meal. Ask for a substitution like water for the soda or fruit instead of the standard dessert.

Ask for a different side dish.

While many chain restaurants do not list any side dish other than french fries, most will allow you to substitute something healthier, like cooked vegetables, if you ask.

Think outside the kids' section.

Adult menus almost universally offer healthy options. Consider sharing an entrée like grilled chicken or fish with your child, or ask about ordering a half portion or lunch portion. Give your children a few choices and have them pick one. This gives them independence while teaching them examples of healthy foods.

Explore the salad bar.

Your kids will love the colorful options of all-you-can-eat salad bars. Let them build their own salads with lots of vegetables and fruits; just limit high-fat toppings like cheese, fried noodles and bacon bits. Keep creamy dressings to a minimum, and ask for dressings to be served on the side.

Order water, seltzer water, or low-fat milk as a beverage.

(For children under age 2, stick with whole milk.) Avoid sweetened soft drinks, which are full of sugar. 100% juice is OK if you only give kids one-half to one cup per day. (Juice has a lot of vitamins but is also high in sugar.)

Avoid high-fat condiments such as sour cream, mayonnaise, tartar sauce, and butter.

Ask for low-fat versions of these if your kids have to have them.

Never super size-unless you plan to share.

The large hamburgers, fries and sodas offered at many fast-food chains are far more than any child, and even many adults, should eat at one sitting. If it is cheaper to order this way, share the meal between at least two people.

15 Ideas for Family Fitness

Kids these days are spending too much time sitting still, and it's becoming a major health risk. American children 8 years old and above spend an average of 6.5 hours a day in sedentary activities like watching TV, using the computer and playing video games. Studies have shown that the more TV kids watch, the more likely they are to be overweight.

Increasing physical activity improves cardiovascular fitness, helps prevent obesity, promotes a healthy lifestyle, boosts self-esteem and confidence, and reduces stress. You don't need to have a lot of fancy equipment or a membership at a health club—there are many ways to make your family's lifestyle more active.

Here are 15 simple ideas for getting your family on the move:

1. When you have the option of taking the stairs or riding in an elevator, take the stairs.
2. Whenever possible, walk short distances rather than driving. When you do take the car, park a little farther away than usual.
3. Get pedometers (step-counters available at most sporting goods stores) and have a contest to see who in the family takes the most steps in a given week.
4. Start a new tradition: take everyone out a few times a week for an after-dinner walk around the neighborhood or park.
5. Do active chores together (raking leaves, shoveling snow, or washing the car).
6. Spend weekend afternoons at the local playground.
7. Take vacations that involve physical activity (hiking, swimming etc.).
8. Play a sport as a family (basketball, soccer, baseball, softball, touch football).
9. Dance.
10. Go for a bike ride with your kids.
11. Plant a garden together.
12. Plan active birthday celebrations, like going miniature golfing, bowling or to the zoo.
13. Have the kids come with you when you walk the dog.
14. Play games like Tag, Simon Says, Red Light-Green Light, and Duck-Duck Goose.
15. Most importantly, have fun! There is a fun physical activity for everyone. It's just a matter of figuring out what you and your kids like to do.



Making Our Schools and Communities Healthier for Children

This section highlights main points from the “Making Schools and Communities Healthier” section of the DVD.

Junk food is readily available to students in most schools. Foods that are provided through federal school lunch and breakfast programs must meet certain nutritional guidelines, but there are few laws dealing with other foods available on school grounds, such as those sold in vending machines, school stores, at fundraisers or in a la carte cafeteria snack lines. As a result, 75 percent of the drinks and 85 percent of the snacks in school vending machines are foods like sweetened soda, candy and chips.

Main Points to Highlight

Soda and other junk foods are a common revenue source for schools. The health consequences cannot be overlooked. Consumption of these foods impacts students’ physical health and their ability to learn.

Parents and schools have realized there is a problem-and many are working together to replace junk food with healthier foods and beverages-without impacting school revenue. They are also figuring out ways to increase opportunities for students to be physically active.

The need for change extends beyond the school day. High quality after school programs are needed, where nutrition and physical activity are emphasized.

In our neighborhoods, we need safe spaces for children to play and safe walking routes to schools.

Questions for Discussion

What are some creative ways to raise money for your school without selling junk food?

Do you have any ideas for getting students to be more physically active during the school day?

What changes are needed in your own community? Are there safe spaces to walk and play? Is it easy to find healthy food?

The State of Nutrition in Schools Today

First, the bad news:

Seventy-five percent of the drinks and 85 percent of the snacks in school vending machines are junk foods like sweetened soda, candy and chips. These types of foods are available in almost all high schools, and in half of elementary schools.

Childhood obesity is costing schools money. A study showed that obese students tend to have higher rates of absenteeism. Because schools' state funding is determined by attendance, absenteeism can cost small districts hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, and losses for large city school districts could be in the millions.

Poor nutrition, even in non-overweight children, can affect brain development and performance in school. Children without proper nutrition may have a shorter attention span, more irritability, and more suspensions.

Now, the good news:

Many schools have found that replacing junk foods with healthier foods and beverages (e.g. bottled water, 100% juice, yogurt, fruit) has not hurt their revenue, and in some cases has even increased revenue.

Many studies show that improvements in school foods lead students to make healthier food choices.

The School Breakfast Program provides students with at least one-fourth and the National School Lunch Program at least one-third of the recommended levels for key nutrients. Children who participate in school meal programs have better nutritional intake than those who do not.

Participation in the School Breakfast Program has been shown to improve standardized test scores, improve attendance, decrease tardiness, and improve participation in class.

The Need for Physical Education and Physical Activity in Our Schools

Studies show that when children's exercise and fitness needs are met, they are better able to learn and achieve. In light of the growing epidemic of obesity and the link between physical activity and academic performance, parents and schools must work together to make quality, daily physical education a priority in our schools and to give our children more opportunities to be physically active throughout the school day. Consider these facts:

Our children spend too much time sitting still.

- Less than 25% of children get at least 30 minutes of physical activity per day.
- Children tend to become less physically active as they get older. By the time they reach their teens, nearly half of America's children are not vigorously active on a regular basis.
- Most children today (85 percent) travel to school by car or bus. Only 13 percent walk or bike to school.
- Many school systems have abolished recess. Only 4 percent of states require recess.
- Between 1991 and 1999, the percentage of students who took physical education on a daily basis dropped from 42% to 29%.

When children are active, they do better in school.

- Studies show that providing more time in school for physical activity (by reducing class time) can lead to increased test scores, particularly in the area of mathematics.
- Physical activity programs have been linked to stronger academic achievement, increased concentration, and improved reading and writing test scores as well.
- Children who have daily physical education classes exhibit better attendance and have a more positive attitude about school.

Adapted from Action for Healthy Kids' Fact Sheet, "Building the Argument: The Need for Physical Education and Physical Activity in Our Schools," www.actionforhealthykids.org

School Wellness Policies: An Opportunity for Parents

Starting with the 2006-2007 school year, every school district in the country (with a federally funded school meals program) must have a written school wellness policy that outlines ways to improve physical activity and nutrition for students in schools.

Parents, take note: Federal law requires districts to include parents (as well as students, food service staff, the school board and administrators) in the development of school wellness policies. This is a unique opportunity for parents to get involved in improving their children's school environment.

What Should Be Included in a Wellness Policy? Your district's wellness policy should include:

- Nutrition education goals
- Physical activity goals
- Nutrition guidelines for all foods available on school campuses
- Ways for parents, students, school administrators, the school board, and the school food authority, as well as the general public, to have input into the wellness policy
- Other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness
- Plans for implementation and evaluation of the school wellness policy.

What Can Parents Do?

Do a Status Check. Make sure you know how healthy your school's environment is and what needs to be improved. Visit the school, talk to the principal, and work with your PTA, school administrators and food service directors to find out the following information:

- What are kids eating when they're at school? Is junk food readily available?
- How much time is provided for physical activity?
- What can be done to make your school environment healthier?

Get in the Loop. Find out who is working on the wellness policy for your school district. Is there an existing group addressing nutrition and/or physical activity issues? Your school or district may already have a wellness council. Are they reaching out to parents, as required by law? Is there an opportunity for parents to get involved?

Build Support. Suggest developing a wellness committee for your own school if you don't have one. Get parents, teachers, the principal, students, administrators, food service personnel, a dietitian, and the school nurse to work together to find ways to improve school health. Make sure your opinions are heard by school board officials.

Spread the Word. Many parents may not be aware of school wellness requirements. Make sure your friends and neighbors know about this opportunity to create healthier learning environments for our children.



Conclusion

This section highlights main points from the conclusion of the Food and Fitness Matter DVD.

In order to reverse the tide of childhood obesity we need to make changes in our homes, schools and communities. Parents are children's most important advocates-but parents can't do it all alone.

Main Points to Highlight

Local, state and national government policies must promote nutrition, physical activity and health awareness.

Texas Specific Text

The state of Texas, in order to promote healthier school environments to combat childhood obesity and type II diabetes passed laws and policies related to:

- School Health Advisory Councils
- Physical Education/Activity Minutes
- Coordinated School Health Programs
- Texas Public School Nutrition Policy
- Local Wellness Policies

In order for schools to comply with these laws and policies, it is important for parents to be informed about and supportive of the changes needed to create healthy school environments. Parents need to make their voices heard on this issue. Creating a wellness committee on your PTA is one of the most effective ways your can get involved and help your school community. Refer to the PTA Healthy Lifestyles at Home and School notebook for information on how to get started.

Questions for Discussion

Were you aware of any of the laws and policies just mentioned?

Do you have already have a PTA Wellness Committee?

How hard would it be to create a wellness committee?



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Eating Out with Your Kids: Finding Healthier Options

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