

# Guide to Healthy Kids

## what parents can do

### Family Lifestyle Quiz —Do you and your family:

1 Have regularly scheduled meal times when you are home?

2 Eat a meal together at least once a day?

3 Eat planned snacks? (instead of just grabbing what ever is around when hungry)?

4 Tailor portion sizes to each person's needs?

5 Plan and prepare meals together once a day?

6 Eat three meals every day?

7 Try to make mealtimes pleasant?

8 Avoid requiring a "clean plate" before leaving the table?

9 Make meals last more than 15 minutes?

10 Eat only in designated areas?

11 Avoid using food to punish or reward?

12 Enjoy physical activities together at least once a week?

### Give yourself

2 points for every "yes"

1 point for every "sometimes"

0 points for every "no"

Check page 2 to see how you scored!

**A**lmost one in two of our children is either overweight or obese.

- The number of obese children and adolescents has tripled or quadrupled in the past four decades.
- African-American and Mexican-American children are at even greater risk.

### How do I know if my child is obese?

Weight is only one of many personal characteristics that distinguish children from one another. Parents naturally want their child to be as perfect as possible, but defining "perfect" can be a challenge—especially when it comes to body size and shape. Both are influenced by genetics, environment, physical activity, and nutrition. Society's emphasis on thinness ignores the reality that children grow at different rates and have different body structures,

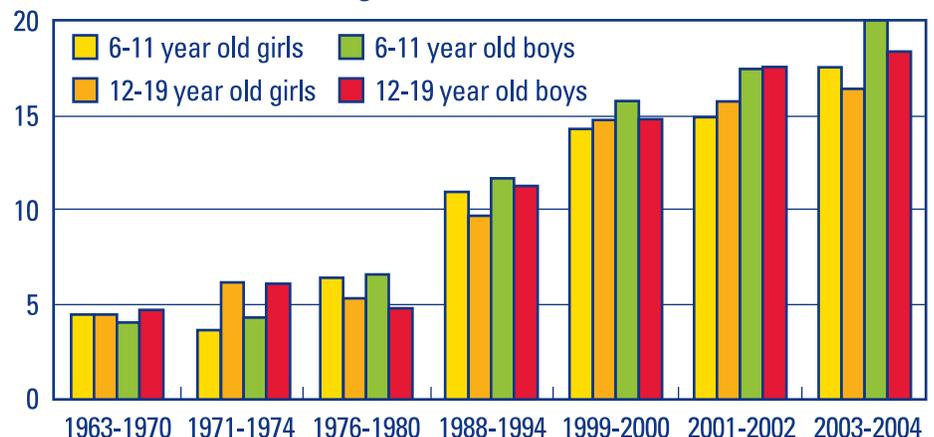
sizes, and shapes from their siblings and playmates.

It is unlikely that an individual child is at risk for obesity without the entire family being at risk as well. Both genetics and environment contribute to weight problems and are shared by the entire family. The family lifestyle quiz (at left) can help you analyze your family's risk.

Obese children do face additional implications for both physical and mental health. Yet it is extremely important that weight and food do not become a tug-of-war between parent and child.

As a parent you can monitor your child's growth using special charts that are available on the Internet (see resource list, page 4) and in many health care settings (physician/pediatrician's offices, WIC clinics, public health departments). Children grow in spurts, but the general goal is to have the child's growth form a curve over time.

Percentage of children who are obese



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## What is the “right” weight for my child?

Standardized growth charts plot height and weight of boys and girls at different ages and can be used in consultation with a pediatrician in determining a child’s recommended weight range.

The value of a growth chart is the story it tells over time. The trend is more important than where specific values fall at a single point in time.

Concerns arise when a child’s body mass index (BMI) falls at or above the 85th percentile. Children between the 85th and 94th percentile are considered overweight. Children at or above the 95th percentile are considered obese.

Only when a child’s BMI is at or above the designated criteria on two or more occasions would he or she be considered to meet that designation.

If you suspect that your child is overweight or obese, visit your health care provider. Take along your child’s growth chart, as well as information about your child’s nutrition and physical activities. Those facts will help make a diagnosis.

 **Researchers have found that when both parents are physically active, the child is six times more likely to be physically active.**

**If one parent habitually eats high fat food, the child is twice as likely to be obese.**

**If both parents eat high fat foods, the child is three to six times more likely to be obese.**

(Understanding Childhood Obesity Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999)

## What can parents do to help a child who is medically defined as overweight?

**1** The most important thing a parent can do is to repeatedly tell and show the child, “I love you.” Never make an issue of a child’s weight.

Making sure your child feels totally loved and accepted, regardless of his or her size, will help contradict messages from society. A child who feels total acceptance at home will be better able to handle negative comments about body size from others.

**2** As a parent, you are the primary role model for your child. Your behaviors have a direct impact on your children.

Healthy eating and physical activity are good lifestyle habits for the entire family. Children who learn the value of exercise and the how-to of choosing healthy snacks and meals are more likely to continue such habits throughout their lives.

**3** Avoid giving special treatment to an overweight child. What

is good for overweight children is good for normal weight children and their families. Never put a child on a special diet or exercise program! Weight loss is not the goal. Instead, focus on weight maintenance, which allows children to grow into their weight.

**4** Finally, be involved in your child’s life. Children of parents

who generally know their child’s whereabouts, set clear rules, and participate appropriately in their child’s school and play activities are more likely to report healthy habits—such as eating a healthy breakfast and lunch and consuming fruits and vegetables. These children also report high levels of family communication.

***It is a parent’s responsibility to offer a variety of nutritious/healthy food options and it is the child’s responsibility to determine how much to eat.***

### How did you score?

(Quiz on page 1)

**20-24 points – Great job!**

**13-19 points – Good job; review the “no” and “sometimes” answers to see what changes you can make.**

**Less than 12 points – Try the suggestions on the following pages; they can have a significant impact on your family’s health.**

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## Strategies for eating well

### Remove temptation

Keep very few high-fat, high-calorie snack foods in the house. Instead, stock up on nutritious/healthy snacks, such as pretzels, nuts, fresh fruit, carrots, bagels, and air-popped popcorn. Research has shown that children eat what is available and perceived as most convenient.

(*Journal of American Dietetic Association* 103(4):497-500)

### Out of sight, out of mind!

Keep the healthier snack alternatives, such as fruits and vegetables, readily available on the counter or easily visible in the refrigerator. Put cookies and chips in less accessible spots and save for “special” occasions.

### Teach hunger identification

Much of today’s eating is in response to “emotional” hunger such as stress, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, and depression, rather than physical hunger. You can help your child differentiate “hunger cues” and “non-hunger cues” by asking if she or he is really hungry before automatically providing a snack.

### Food is only food

Never use food as a punishment or reward. Withholding food can make children anxious that they will not get enough food, thus stimulating overeating. Similarly, using food as a reward teaches children that some foods are better or more valuable than others.

### Recognize age differences

MyPlate provides recommended daily amounts for each food group. Remember that children tend to eat smaller portions of food, which means they may need to eat more frequently to meet the recommended daily amounts. A general rule of thumb for toddlers and preschoolers is one tablespoon of food per year of age.



### Offer regular meals and snacks

Missing meals frequently leads to unplanned snacking and overeating. Children eat smaller portions, but more frequently. Studies indicate that children who eat regular meals control their weight more successfully. Planned snacks also help teach healthy eating habits.

### Imitate restaurants

You can help children learn appropriate portion sizes by pre-portioning meals and snacks using age difference guidelines rather than serving family style.

### Share the fun

Involving children when selecting and preparing food has many benefits—for you and for them. Children are more likely to taste and eat foods that they help choose and prepare. Learning through participation also helps children feel like they are helping the family.

### Ban the “clean plate club”

Children should not be taught or forced to eat everything on their plates. They need to learn to listen to internal cues regarding hunger and satiety.

### Savor meals and snacks

Mealtime can be a highlight of your family’s day by making it a time for conversation and fun, as well as food. No meal should last less than 15 minutes. The stomach needs about 20 minutes to get the message to the brain that it is satisfied. If food is eaten in less than 15 minutes, it is likely that the child will not feel satisfied. On the other hand, if the same amount of food is made to last 20 minutes or longer the child will feel satisfied.

### Create selective dining areas

Meals and snacks should only be eaten in a few designated areas of the home—the kitchen, the dining room, and perhaps a summer porch, deck, or patio. Regularly sharing food in conjunction with television watching can lead to overeating and weight concerns. This practice reinforces eating in response to a non-hunger cue.

## Let's get moving— tips for encouraging family physical activity

### Play together

Children of all ages say that they would like to do outdoor games and activities with parents and they would like their parents to encourage them to become involved in various physical activities.

(*Journal of American Dietetic Association* 103(4):497-500)

### Limit screen time

Screen time—including TV, video games, and computer use—should be limited to no more than 2 hours per day. By setting limits on the amount of time children spend in front of the computer and TV, you help them learn to balance their lives with a variety of activities.

### Use your calendar

Set aside time every week to schedule at least 1 or 2 family activities, such as hiking, biking, raking leaves, playing tag, gardening, or playing Frisbee.

#### ... and justice for all

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### Ban in-room screens

Seventy-seven percent of sixth graders have a television in their room!

An excellent way to encourage activity—and increase family communication—is to remove television sets from children's rooms. Likewise, children do not need a computer in their room; although exceptions may be necessary for high school-aged youth.

(*Kaiser Family Foundation Report* 1999)

### Adopt a "moving" lifestyle

Parking at the far end of the parking lot, using the stairs, and walking the dog instead of watching the dog are all activities that can become lifelong healthy habits.

### Nix "no pain, no gain" thinking

Physical activities that are planned for the family must be fun for the children to continue enjoying them throughout their lives.

### Variety is the spice of life

Plan several different activities for your child to experience and enjoy.

### Dance the day away

Music can be a powerful toe-tapping incentive. Turn on the radio or CD player and have your children create a new dance. Purchase a CD that has easy and fun dances (i.e. Cha Cha Slide).

### Join the crowd

Many communities have planned activities for youth and families through a local parks and recreation department. If yours doesn't, talk to other parents and see what's needed to create a program.

## Check these Resources

### BMI calculator

*Baylor College of Medicine*  
[www.bcm.edu/cnrc-apps/bodycomp/bmiz2.html](http://www.bcm.edu/cnrc-apps/bodycomp/bmiz2.html)

*Centers for Disease Control*  
[apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi/Calculator.aspx](http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi/Calculator.aspx)

### Growth Charts

*National Center for Health Statistics*  
[www.cdc.gov/growthcharts](http://www.cdc.gov/growthcharts)

### Publications

*Child of Mine: Feeding With Love and Good Sense.* Ellyn Satter. Boulder, CO: Bull Publishing. 2000

*If Your Child Is Overweight: A Guide for Parents, 3rd Edition.* S.M. Kosharek. American Dietetic Association 2006

**Other titles available from the Extension Online Store** ([store.extension.iastate.edu](http://store.extension.iastate.edu)):

*Food for ME TOO: Nutrition for the Toddler and Preschooler* (PM 1257)

*Healthy Hearts: How to Monitor Fat and Cholesterol* (PM 1967)

*Non-food Alternatives for School Rewards and Fundraising* (PM 2039a)

*Overweight Kids: What Communities Can Do* (PM 1884)

*Say 'YES' to Family Meals* (PM 1842)

*Snacks for Healthy Kids* (PM 1264)

*Steps to a Healthier Family* (PM 2005)

*What Schools Can Do to Promote Healthy Eating* (PM 2039)

*What's for Lunch? It's In the Bag* (PM 3026)

### Website

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Nutrition and Wellness  
[www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/child-nutrition-families](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/child-nutrition-families)

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