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Healthy Living in a Lazy World

By Glen Herbert

Peter Nieman, a Calgary pediatric obesity expert, has said that the “mantra” which guides his work is that “the best way to prevent adult obesity is to prevent childhood obesity.” Which sounds simple, doesn’t it? But what he and others also know is that, in Canada, that’s far easier said than done. Despite decades of attempts to get young people moving more and eating better (remember the Health Hustle?) we continue to move less, to eat worse, and to get bigger and bigger each year. Today nearly 60 per cent of us, or about 14 million people, are overweight.

Children and teens are getting bigger faster than any other group. Since the late 80s, the rate of obesity in youth 12 to 17 has tripled from 3% to 9%. It may sound like just numbers, but for people who follow those numbers, they are jaw dropping. Indeed, they were using the word “epidemic” back when the rate was still just 3%.

It’s more of a problem than most of us are aware. Being overweight, whether a lot or just a little, can contribute to heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, osteoarthritis, some forms of cancer, as well as mental health issues including low self esteem and depression. Because of rising obesity rates, for the first time in memory, today’s teens have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. They are also three to five times more likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke before they reach the age of 65. In all, weight is *the* health problem—more than smoking or cancer—that we and our children will live most closely with, suffer the most from, and pay the most for.

What parents can’t do

Parents can’t change the world, though to some extent, to really make a difference as far as childhood obesity is concerned, that’s what it would take. In Canada, we live within what experts call an obesogenic environment, or one in which we simply have less and less opportunity for physical activity, and an endless supply of rich, high fat, high energy foods. We drive rather than walk, we eat rich food rather than lean, more often than not because those are the only choices available to us. Just try finding the stairs in a mall or an office building, or try riding a bike to work. Many streets don’t even have sidewalks and, if they do, in the winter they aren’t plowed. The choice to hoof it is, as a result, not one that many people would make twice. There are other examples, too, and the result is exactly what we are seeing across the board in all demographic groups: bigger people.

This is true for children even more than most. They just don’t live the life that you and I did. When I was young, we would take off for the day on bikes so long as we were home by dinnertime. Parents offering as long a leash today would raise eyebrows if not a call to the authorities. Fewer kids walk to school, ride bikes, or just run around the neighbourhood. Of course, it’s safety, not neglect or laziness, that is at issue. Nevertheless, as a result, apart from typing with their thumbs on their PDAs, kids just aren’t getting any physical activity. It’s a very big deal: today one in four Canadian children are “not active enough for optimal growth and development” as reported by Health Canada.

Parents can’t change the eating habits of the country either, and it’s too bad that we can’t. Because of the demands of our lifestyles, we eat out more and more. We eat out because we can, because we’re busy, and because we like to. You know that it isn’t great and, at the risk of

sounding like a nag, it really isn't great. In many cases, the menu choices available out there are disastrous. You probably don't know this beyond a hunch because restaurants don't need to tell you, but if they did, you'd be horrified. Most kids, give or take, need about 1400 calories in a day. Your average burger can easily approach half that, and then we add the fries and the drink. Even a large milkshake can run in excess of 700 calories.

What parents can do

That's the background that we are all working against. It's a fattening life that we all lead. But, through it all, there are in fact lots of things that we can do to help both ourselves and our children.

- **Do stuff.** Team sports are good, but it's the activity in the day to day that will really make the difference. When given a choice, choose to walk, or use the stairs, or anything at all in order to spend less time sitting in front of the tube. If you do, your kids will too, maybe whether they like it or not.
- **Do stuff together.** Studies have shown that, the more we work together, the happier and slimmer we'll be. Focusing on just one child can easily feel like punishment, and it also won't work. Doing stuff together, will.
- **Make small changes.** You can't change the world in a day, and in fact, you don't even need to. A little change today can mean a lot, such as limiting high-fat snacks and pop. A study released in the journal Pediatrics this past April reported a school system in Philadelphia had a 50 percent reduction in obesity in just two years. Treadmills? Starvation diets? Nope, all they did was remove high fat snacks and sugary drinks from the schools.
- **Be objective.** Is your child heavier than he should be? We know that 26% of Canadian children are overweight or obese, still only 9% of Canadian report that this is the case. That other 17%, for whatever reason, aren't doing themselves or their children any favors. When done with care and support, being honest about health issues including weight can be one of the kindest things that you do.

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Cut out the ... juice?

One of the first things that pediatrician Dr. Laura Gerber counsels her patients to do is "cut out the juice and pop!" We think juice is a healthy alternative, and certainly it can be, but it's easy to overdo a good thing. Like pop, it is also high in sugar and, therefore, calories. "Some children are drinking so much pop or juice that they are drinking their entire day's worth of calories, never mind the food they eat." One small glass of juice is all a child would need in a day.

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