

Fighting fat

KEEPING OUR CHILDREN HEALTHY IN TODAY'S BUSY WORLD IS OFTEN EASIER SAID THAN DONE. **RHIAN KIRKBY** REVEALS HOW SIMPLE CHANGES CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

According to the government, by the age of 11 one in three children in England is overweight, and if trends continue, half of all children will be overweight or obese by 2020.

The figures may sound shocking, but sadly they are true, with MPs even going as far as to describe the issue as a 'national emergency' and a problem which costs the NHS £5.1 billion each year.

The need for drastic action to avert this crisis has been well documented over the last couple of years, with the likes of chef Jamie Oliver championing the move for change. But while campaigners push for some 'big-picture' solutions to the problem, parents are being encouraged to look a little closer to home.

PORTION CONTROL

Research from the Infant & Toddler Forum shows that nearly 80 per cent of pre-schoolers are being given too much to eat, with 10 per cent of parents routinely serving up adult-sized portions for their little ones.

"Parents are much more likely to worry that their child is underweight, rather than overweight," explains paediatric nutritionist Judy More, "and as a result, children are often encouraged to eat more than they need." She advises parents to respect their child's ability to know when they're full and to stop offering alternatives, such as milk and crisps, if they don't eat their meals. But portion control isn't just a problem for pre-schoolers. According to child psychologist Gill Harris, it continues

throughout childhood and has far-reaching effects: "How much parents offer often determines how much children will eat and habits learned in early life generally tend to persist," she says.

SNACKS

Of course, it's not just about mealtimes, snacks also have a big part to play. "Giving in to pester power for unhealthy and calorific snacks is easier than having to say no," says nutritionist Ela Law, "but giving in means parents won't be able to manage their child's weight and energy balance."

That's not to say that snacks should be banned. In fact, according to Judy More, children need two planned snacks a day – one in the morning and one in the afternoon. She emphasises these should be sensible, nutritious foods such as fruit, oatcakes or breadsticks, with sweet, high calorie and low nutrient foods being given just once a week.

"The after-school snack has become a growing problem," says Denise, a primary school teacher, "and banning certain snacks in schools has made the problem worse. It's amazing to see how many parents greet their children every day with crisps, sweets or chocolate. We've stopped the ice cream van parking outside school, but you still see queues of parents at it just around the corner. This is where pester power really wins out."

RECOGNISE THE SIGNS

So with children becoming bigger in general it is harder to recognise the danger signs?

"Absolutely," says professor Russell Viner from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, "because overall the population is getting heavier our idea of what is a normal weight changes." Ela Law agrees, "there's a very fine line between puppy fat and being overweight. Puppy fat isn't the cute, innocent thing everyone loves in a baby – it's in fact a very real problem."

Health professionals all advise that if you suspect there's an issue it's better to deal with it early. A routine visit to your GP will determine whether your child is in a healthy

weight range and you can calculate their BMI yourself, online. "Of course, as children get older they will become more self-aware of their weight and body shape. It's so important that they feel good about themselves and don't punish themselves if they don't conform to what they think is an ideal shape. The mental health problems associated with obesity are as worrying as the physical impact it can have," Russell Viner explains.

WHAT TO DO

As adults, we think that going on a diet and

cutting out foods is the way to lose weight, but this isn't the right approach when it comes to our children. Children need a rich and varied diet – what they don't need is low nutrient, high calorie food and drink. Judy More advises parents to control their child's portions, give nutritious snacks and encourage regular movement, and says these things alone should enable children to lose their excess weight as they grow taller.

"Subtlety is key," says Tam Fry of the National Obesity Forum, "the less children know about it the better."

His advice has been backed up by a recent study from Liverpool University which found that a parent's perception of their child's weight can have an impact on the child's actual weight. Children whose parents considered them to be 'overweight' tended to gain more weight over the following decade compared with those children whose parents thought they were a 'normal weight'.

Proof, maybe, that keeping quiet, leading by example and moving more really could have an impact on our children's growing waistlines. **D**

How much you serve up often determines how much your child will eat. Let them listen to their own bodies to know when they are full



FEED THEM WELL

- According to the Early Years Nutrition Partnership, young children are eating the equivalent of eight sugar cubes a day (the recommended is three to four). Swap sweets and chocolate for malt loaf snack packs, oat cakes with cream cheese or sugar-free jelly.
- **Omega 3 fatty acids are essential for brain development and the nervous system. Get more oily fish into their diets by serving up salmon, fresh tuna and mackerel in a fish pie or homemade fish fingers.**
- Kids are also consuming too little fibre – just 10g per day, instead of the recommended 15g. Choose tasty sources such as apples, carrots, bananas and berries, and swap white bread and pasta for wholegrain varieties.