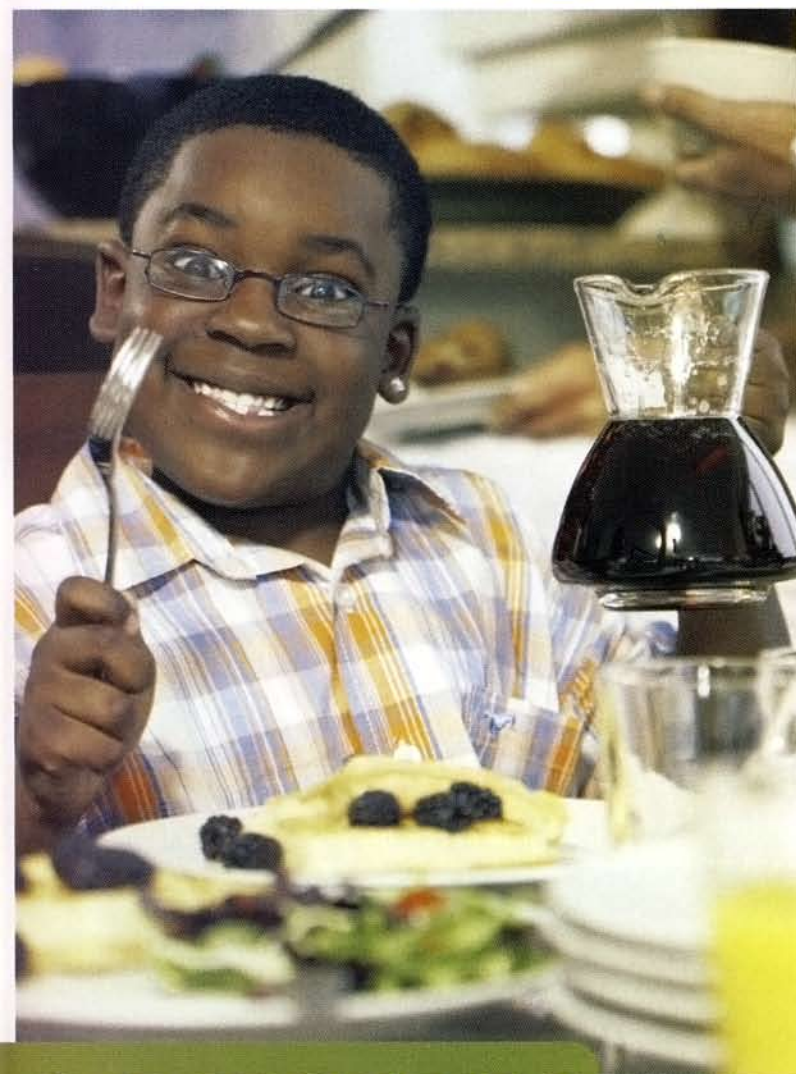


# CHILDHOOD



# OBESITY

Easter candy, end-of-the-semester pizza parties, summertime snowballs. Regardless of the season, there's always a reason for kids to celebrate – and food is often a focal point of the occasion. And, how can a child say no? So, this is where mom and dad come in to educate their kids, helping them to take charge of their health.

It's no surprise that kids today are struggling with weight more than ever before. Schools get much of the blame with notoriously unhealthy cafeteria lunch menus, calorie-laden vending machines, and a continually decreasing emphasis on physical education. But a new study published in the April issue of the American Journal of Public Health is showing us that it's not just the schools contributing to kids' weight problems, but it's often the home environment that also plays a key role.

After tracking more than 5,000 kids in 310 schools across the country,

researchers found that kids' body mass index (or "BMI," a standard weight-to-height measurement) increased more than twice as fast during summer break than during the regular school year.

It seems that the saying – "lazy days of summer" – rings true for so many children. They've got more than enough time to lounge around, watch TV, play video games, and snack.

The study's researchers emphasize that it's still important to improve the quality of foods offered to kids in school, however. And it's just as important to address kids' lifestyles and home environment.

Parents must take an active role, encouraging their children to develop healthy habits from an early age. Parents can set an example themselves by exercising regularly, choosing nutritious foods, and keeping their pantries well-stocked with healthy options.

*Here are a few tips from Julie Fortenberry, RD, nutritionist with the I Can Do It youth fitness program at Elmwood Fitness Center:*

- **Be a good role model:** How's your attitude toward a healthy lifestyle? Do you eat nutritiously? Do you exercise regularly? Remember, you are the number one role model for your children. Teach them good habits and be sure to follow them yourself!
- **Encourage your child to eat breakfast:** It's true – breakfast really is the most important meal of the day. Make it a point to provide healthy breakfast options for your child, such as whole grain toast with melted cheese, whole grain cereal with low fat milk, multi grain waffles with peanut butter.
- **Pay attention to portion sizes:** Help kids learn the serving sizes of their favorite foods. Many kids have become so accustomed to seeing "BIG" portions that they see these as normal.

- **Involve your kids in cooking a meal:**

Get their input on what's for dinner each week. Put them in charge of finding certain "healthy" items in the grocery store. Give them a job to assist in preparing dinner. This helps them to feel included and excited about eating new, healthy foods.

- **Eat together as a family:**

This allows time together and makes dinner fun. Get in the habit of eating at the dinner table, not in front of the television.

- **Keep mealtime a low-stress event.**

Don't rush kids through their meals. Remind them to eat slowly and chew well. This will give them a chance to feel full before they overeat. It takes 20- 30 minutes for our brains to get the signal from our stomachs that we've had enough food. Kids (and adults!) may miss this signal if they are eating too fast.

- **No "Clean Plate Club":**

Kids know when they have had enough food. Allow them to listen to their bodies.

- **Exercise together as a family:**

Take advantage of summer's extra daylight and go for an evening walk or bike ride with the whole family.

- **Set goals for the summer:**

Make fitness challenging – but fun! For example: "By the end of the summer, I will be able to run a mile" or "by Fourth of July, I will have decreased my soda intake to only two a week." Make it a big deal if they reach their goals by rewarding them with something other than food – like new clothes or games. **H&FM**



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