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Is Media Making Your Children Fat?

The prevalence of obesity in American children has doubled in the last 3 decades. However, this is not just a North American problem. Obesity in children is quickly becoming a world wide epidemic. A recent article in *Pediatrics*: The official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, looks at the role that television and other media plays in childhood obesity.

In North America, our children spend on average 7 hours per day with media. Other than sleeping, it is the single biggest use of their time.

There is much evidence which links excessive television viewing with obesity. Excessive TV viewing often results in:

- ❑ An increase in inactivity resulting in a more sedentary lifestyle
- ❑ Unhealthy eating habits motivated by the content of programming and advertisements for unhealthy foods
- ❑ Increased snacking while viewing
- ❑ Interference of normal sleeping habits

Children and teens who watch more TV consume more calories or eat higher-fat diets. In 2009 the fast-food industry spent \$4.2 billion on advertising! A study of 50,000 ads in 2003-2004 on 170 top-rated programs found that 98% of the ads seen by kids aged 2-11, were for products that are high in fat, sugar and/or sodium, and of low nutritional value. Aka “junk food”. Our children see on average 4400-7600 ads for junk food per year, compared to 165 ads that promote good nutrition and physical activity.

We are living in a technology driven society. Television isn't the only type of media our children have access to, and this type of advertising is not limited to television. The junk food industry uses web advertising to further entice the

consumer with their products. Many of these brands include “advergames” (games promoting their products), cartoon characters and designated “childrens’ areas” within their websites. But our children don’t have to access the web site of these brands, they are inundated with pop-ups while visiting other web sites.

Many of us believe that we must over-eat to gain weight, but an increase of just 50 calories per day results in a weight gain of 5lbs per year. One can of pop per day can result in a weight gain of 15lbs per year! About 40% of calories consumed by American children come from solid fat and added sugars, and 10% from pop and fruit drinks.

Obesity can have devastating affects on the over all health of our children. Children with weight issues have a higher incidence of stress/mood disorders, an increased risk of substance abuse, diabetes, asthma, and heart disease.

What can we do?

- ❑ Monitor the amount of time our kids are spending with media.
- ❑ Discuss food advertising with children and educate them about healthier eating habits.
- ❑ Limit access to media for non-educational purposes to 2 hours per day.
- ❑ Avoid access to television and internet in our kids’ bedrooms to promote better sleep habits
- ❑ Avoid screen exposure to children under 2 years of age.
- ❑ Encourage our doctors and our governments to work together to develop programs which support healthy lifestyles, and legislation which limits the amount and type of advertising which targets children.

The most important thing to remember is that these are OUR children. It is up to us to be good role models for healthy living and to teach them to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Reference

From the American Academy of Pediatrics: Policy **Statement**: Children, Adolescents, **Obesity**, and the **Media**, Council on Communications **and Media** *Pediatrics* 2011; 128:1 201-208; doi:10.1542/peds.2011-1066

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