

Obesity in Children:

An Analysis Paper

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Abstract

This paper takes a closer look at the nature of obesity as well as its causes, consequences and risks, both physically and psychologically. It defines obesity as a body fat percentage of over twenty-five percent for boys and thirty-two percent for girls or a BMI higher than the ninety-fifth percentile. Physical health risks include Type II Diabetes and various disorders with the eating, sleeping, the liver, the respiratory system and the heart, among others. Psychological health risks include negative physical self-perception and lower self-worth. These translate into behavior problems, learning problems, academic performance issues and even depression. Easier access to unhealthy foods, lack of physical activity, poor parental role modeling and curriculum-deemphasized physical education are factors that promote obesity. Fortunately, the condition may be reversed by eating healthier foods, avoiding unhealthier ones and increasing physical activity. It is also necessary to deal with any underlying emotional issues that may be feeding the condition.

Keywords: obesity, children, health

Obesity in Children: An Analysis Paper

One of the foremost problems facing children today is the problem of obesity. People are quick to mention the health risks involved, and rightly so, yet the scope of the problem goes beyond the physical implications to the realm of the emotional and the psychological. This paper will examine the risks and consequences that obesity presents to children as compared to that their non-obese counterparts.

Some people define obesity as a body fat percentage of over twenty-five percent for boys and thirty-two percent for girls or a ninety-fifth percentile body mass index (BMI) or higher. According to the American Obesity Association, around fifteen percent of adolescents and kids aged six to eleven are considered obese in the US and developed countries, and the numbers are expected to increase (Fenton, n.d.).

Physically, obese children are at greater risk than non-obese children of acquiring Type II diabetes, a condition formerly thought to affect only adults. They are also more susceptible to eating disorders (Emotional eating, bulimia) than their healthier counterparts. If left unchecked, the extra weight that their bodies carry may lead to orthopedic disorders and coronaryopathy. They are also at risk for liver, respiratory and even sleep disorders. The list goes on and on. ("Obesity in Children—Causes," n.d.).

Unfortunately, the health risks also cover the emotional and social realms as well. One of the major challenges that obese kids have to deal with is self-esteem, or the lack of it. In a controlled study, Braet and Mervielde (1997) compared clinical and non-clinical samples of obese and non-obese children aged nine to twelve. They discovered that all of the obese participants suffered from negative physical self-perceptions and lower self-worth. The parents of these kids also reported a greater incidence of behavior

issues. Tershakovec (2004), however, argued that not all obese children actually suffer from psychological problems. Rather, it has been suggested that the kids who tend to blame their obesity on their behavior rather than external factors (genetics, for example) are the ones who are most negatively affected. The results are hardly surprising: learning problems, academic performance issues and even depression. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to see healthier children bullying and/or teasing their obese counterparts for being "different." This adds fuel to the fire and creates a vicious cycle of emotional eating, additional weight gain, more stigmatization and depression (Bailey, n.d.).

With all the health risks involved, why would anyone want to be obese in the first place? The answer is: they wouldn't. No one really chooses to be obese per se. Rather it is the direct consequence of a number of lifestyle choices that they have consciously or unconsciously made and reinforced over a long period of time.

Genetic considerations aside, children become obese due to poor eating patterns and more sedentary pursuits that results in a lack of physical activity. There is literally a wealth of high-fat and sugary food on the market today, making it a challenge for the discriminating to stay healthy. ("Obesity in Children—Causes," n.d.)

Another reason involves parental role modeling. Kids are great at copying their parents' modeled behavior: if their parents make it a habit to eat unhealthy food or avoid exercise like the plague, chances are their children will do the very same things and pass their bad habits to the next generation. Likewise, kids of health-conscious parents will likely pick up the latter's good habits even if they aren't directly taught ("Obesity in Children—Causes," n.d.).

Society itself has also contributed to the obesity problem. The food industry has made unhealthy food cheaper and more readily available in bigger portions than ever before, complete with marketing to match. Technology (E.g. automobiles) has made it physically easier to travel longer distances. Ironically, schools have deemphasized physical education during a time when it is most needed ("Obesity in Children—Causes, n.d.).

The good news is that weight isn't destiny: there are many things that parents and kids can do nurture physical and psychological health. The most basic thing that anyone can do is to increase the amount of physical activity that the child engages in, decrease the consumption of unhealthy food and increase the consumption of nutritious food. Consulting nutritionists, coaches/trainers and other professionals will also help in this regard (Holecko, n.d.).

There are times, however, when deeper emotional issues may be reinforcing the behavior that maintains obesity. In this case, it is necessary to determine the root cause of the problem and deal appropriately with it. For example, children may resort to emotional eating to comfort themselves because they do not know how to express certain negative emotions in a healthy way. In these cases, a little loving confrontation is necessary. Parents need to listen to their children, affirm them and work out healthier alternatives to comfort foods. Interestingly, children who feel that they are loved unconditionally will be more inclined to develop healthier lifestyles (Begley, n.d.).

In closing, it's best to prevent children from becoming obese in the first place by dealing with the issues behind the weight gain before they lead to it. If the kids are already obese, however, there is no need to worry. With a little discipline and a lot of

moral support, obese children need not grow up into obese adults—the trick is to work together as a family to promote positive change. If someone like me can shave off a hundred pounds with the help of friends and family, then anyone can, too.

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