

Children growing up obese
by Mike DeCinti

Those of you who have been keeping up with my articles know this year has been pretty busy for me with my training and competing in the Ford Ironman Triathlon. However all of that pails in comparison to my latest news.

I'm going to be a father!

My wife Alison and I are expecting our first child and as you can guess, we are absolutely thrilled. She is currently in her 16th week (doing great by the way) and we are anxiously awaiting our baby's late May arrival. So like every expectant parent my focus has suddenly turned toward "all things baby." In fact since we've made the announcement most of our days have been filled with current parents, both new and not so new, bombarding us with advice on parenting. Helpful tips, do's and don't's and endless amounts of stories on how our lives are going to "drastically change...but for the better." Of course Alison and I try to process all of this while keeping in mind those things we feel are important and those things we want to do with our children. And although it is a few years down the road, one area we often discuss concerning our child's future is teaching them the importance of eating right, exercising and taking care of themselves.

So when I recently came across a special issue of TIME magazine on the troubling epidemic of juvenile obesity, I found myself reading it with a new sense of importance.

- 19% of American children age six to eleven are obese.
- 32% of all American children are overweight.
- North Carolina ranks 10th in overweight children but 5th for those considered obese.

First it's important to realize that our overweight and obese children are not just dealing with a few extra pounds to carry around, but much more serious problems they could have the rest of their lives. It can lead to acid reflux, constipation, gallstones, asthma and life threatening problems such as depression, cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Not to mention muscle damage, skeletal abnormalities and the weakening of bone resulting in misalignment, pain and limping.

But for how serious the problem is, the factors that lead to its cause, can be a bit complex. Bottom line is that a poor diet of high calorie fatty foods, combined with a lack of exercise is the reason our children are fat, but unfortunately other aspects play a role in getting us to that point.

One main aspect may be genetics, but we also have to look at the environment and geographical location the child lives in, their community, education, race, and income level. All of these may play a role in creating this problem. However I would stop short in saying any of them are excuses for allowing our children to become obese.

First off, you have to be honest to both yourself and your child. Denying a problem, so as not to upset you or them is not going to solve the problem. A recent study found that only 36% of parents of overweight children recognized and/or admitted the fact that their children were overweight. And we can't expect "someone else" to deal with it for us. Hoping that the schools we send our children to might solve the problem is wishful thinking, but not a strategy. According to recent research looking into the lunches our children are served in school found some disturbing news. On average a school lunch may have as many as 1,200 calories loaded with 61% of the daily value of fat and 92% of the daily value of sodium. Plus after-school athletics and physical education classes are also starting to disappear, with only 25% of children attending Phys ed but spending at least three hours in front of a TV or computer.

So it is clearly up to the parents to not only be the decision maker when it comes to their child's diet but also to encourage exercise, and do it all by being the most powerful role model in their lives. Which is something I hope to be able to do for my children.

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