



Dealing with Obesity Issues in Kids

Tackling poor or harmful nutrition habits head on with a child or teenager can be very difficult. Often, their high body weight is either as a result of comfort eating, a statement that eating is something they can control or have power over, or may simply be a result of foods they are provided from parents and friends. The topic needs to be approached carefully and small gradual steps taken to make improvements.

Some children like the concept of being set “challenges”, so this can be a good way to get them to alter their intake. Do not offer gifts or monetary rewards for weight loss, or punishments for lack of results on the scales. Sometimes, the child might be making food changes, but initially no weight loss occurs, so the child still needs to be congratulated and further encouraged for making the effort. Behaviour change needs to be the emphasis (ie. eating more fruit, riding a bike 2 nights a week) rather than simply weight loss. The most important thing to do is always keep positive with the child – and this can be difficult when you are dealing with a child whose weight keeps increasing. Show unconditional support, love and acceptance, and congratulate on positive changes.

It is never advised that children lose a large amount of weight rapidly, even if they are obese. If the child still has much growing to do (eg. a child pre-puberty), the preferred method of weight loss is to assist the child to lose a small amount of weight (ie. maximum 5kg depending on their weight), and then simply hold their weight stable whilst they grow. In other words, they might gain 6cm over a year, but still carry the same body weight, so they look like they have “stretched”. Not only can this prevent growth being stunted, but it also may place less pressure on the child.

It is essential that you do not attempt to cause weight loss in a child, without the assistance of a dietitian, GP, or paediatrician. Because they are still growing physically and emotionally, there are many complex medical and psychological issues that need to be taken into account. However, suggesting general advice to improve their diet from this manual can give children a good start!

The following are some good tips for families of an overweight child. Weight loss in children tends to be much more effective when the entire family adapts the new foods and patterns of eating, rather than simply singling the child out. It is likely that it is not only that child whom needs to make changes to improve health!

- Encourage the child to drink water instead of soft drink, cordial or fruit juice.
- Strongly encourage children and adolescents to eat a healthy breakfast, to assist with concentration and energy levels.
- Have a “healthy snack” household, providing choices such as fresh fruit and vegetables, nutritious low fat smoothies and yoghurts, and healthy muffins.
- Allow teenagers to choose healthy snacks from the supermarket, or provide simple recipes for them to make (eg. smoothies, low fat packet muffins, pita pizzas).
- As much as possible, eat home-cooked meals together as a family.
- Turn the television off whilst eating meals, and enjoy conversation. Encourage children and adolescents to eat meals slowly and taste what they are eating!
- With younger children, avoid using food as either a reward or punishment. Avoid using moral values with foods (ie. good / bad / treats).