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America's Childhood Obesity Epidemic

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By Marian Wright Edelman

October 13th, 2007

[Health]

Children around the world face life-threatening nutrition problems.

The international child relief organization, Save the Children, says that each year, chronic long-term malnutrition contributes to the deaths of approximately 6.5 million children worldwide. These are children who just don't get enough to eat from day to day. Hunger is a major concern in America as well, though less severe and widespread than we find in some sub-Saharan African countries.

Yet other children in our rich nation face quite a different nutrition problem, one that imperils the health of millions: our national epidemic of childhood obesity.

The obesity epidemic is getting worse in the United States, where we consume high-fat, high-sugar, high-calorie diets and live increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Over the past two decades, the prevalence of overweight children in our nation between ages 6 and 11 has doubled, and among teenagers it has tripled. The annual National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that about one-third of all American children — 25 million — are overweight or nearly so.

Unlike adults, children need extra nutrients and calories to fuel their development. But they are at risk of becoming obese when their caloric intake is out of balance, that is, when it exceeds what they need to sustain their daily activities, their growth and their metabolism.

Childhood obesity is a serious health crisis. Physicians now find themselves diagnosing early hypertension and full-blown high blood pressure among children and adolescents stemming from excessive weight gain. These conditions can lead to type 2 diabetes and heart disease caused by high blood pressure and/or high cholesterol. Until recently, these were ailments common only among middle-aged and elderly adults.

The answer is not to blame the children. In fact, overweight children are often teased and bullied. When this happens, when they are rejected by their peers, or ridiculed by teachers or parents, it only lowers their self-esteem and can make them vulnerable to dangerous eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Understanding the main causes of obesity is not rocket science. Most of the factors that make children overweight are obvious and in plain sight: supersized fast food, omnipresent vending machines offering snacks, candies, desserts, soft drinks and other high-sugar beverages. After school, children rather than asking to go out and play, are sitting on their bottoms watching television, playing video games and surfing the Internet. There is a psychological element to this problem as well. For some children, as for many adults, overeating is a way of coping with emotional problems, stress, boredom and negative social influences.

Minority children are more likely to be overweight than White children. According to recent study findings published in the Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism, 11 percent of White children are overweight compared to 25 percent of Black children.

Preventing childhood obesity begins with something as simple as mother's milk. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that breast-fed infants learn to stop eating when the milk flow ends and don't pile on excessive "baby fat." The flow of milk is more continuous for formula-fed babies. Beyond infancy, the means to prevent obesity are largely in the hands of the parents and adults raising children, who buy and cook the food their families eat.

Parents have the power to choose fresh fruits and vegetables over the processed or convenience foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt. For many inner-city residents without transportation or convenient supermarkets, this can be a tough challenge. Parents can also cut back on sugar and white carbohydrates like rice, pasta and bread made from bleached flour. Low-fat food preparation



is important and I've struggled to eat chicken baked instead of fried (except once in a while!). And the size of portions should be limited. Other simple dos and don'ts are making healthy snacks like apples and carrot sticks available. Don't keep soft drinks in the refrigerator. Cut back on the number of times you eat out and have more sit-down meals as a family.

Parents also have the power to limit the amount of time their children spend in front of a TV screen or computer monitor. Don't put a television set in a child's bedroom. Instead, find new ways for your child to keep physically active. Activity not only burns calories and keeps a child's weight down but also builds strong bones and muscles and helps children sleep better at night. Be creative. Make physical activity a family affair.

Childhood obesity is a serious national problem, but it is one all of us can attack. Arm yourself with the facts and take action. For most of us what is required is doable with manageable expense and a lot of common sense.

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