

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Obesity and our kids: what’s up? It seems like every time I turn on MSNBC or CNN these days for a news update, some mention is made of the crisis, particularly among children and youth, of *obesity in America*.

All across our country, it seems, increasing numbers of our young people are overweight. In the common vernacular, they’re fat or worse. So, what’s up? And the larger question, what are we going to do about it?

Some estimates place the annual cost to our nation for this staggering health care development at \$100 billion—clearly, a frighteningly high number. Studies reveal that 15% of 6-11 year-olds fall in the *obese* category. Percentages are still higher—25%—for Hispanic and African Americans.

The causes for these startling numbers are not complicated to uncover. Mostly, they come under the heading: *life-style*. Contemporary children and youth lead increasingly more sedentary lives than their counterparts some decades back. They spend far too many hours in front of the TV, the computer, or deeply engrossed in the most recent *Nintendo DS* electronic game, play station, X-box or some Wii games.

In addition to the sedentary life-style, diet, too, plays an important role. Too many kids get locked into junk food eating patterns that are not only nutritionally deficient but that, regrettably, become part of their permanent food plan as young adults and beyond.

Consequences. The consequences of the sedentary life-style too many of our youth culture are leading ought to concern us.

To further confirm what news reports and numerous articles have been saying on this, I asked the director of our pre-school (The Growing Place), Maggie Schneider, about this. *What consequences do you see*, I asked her?

Immediately, she pointed to *stifled creativity and social skills*. Apparently, kids—particularly children—can spend hours on end absorbed in their games with little or no interaction with friends or family. Large numbers of them, she adds, don’t know how to play the most simple outdoor games—activity those of us in our forties, fifties and beyond took for granted growing up.

Still, of course, the overarching concern lingers about obesity and being overweight. So, what’s the bottom line in all of this, and where do we look for solutions?

Parental involvement. No matter how we sort out solutions to adolescent obesity, at some point it comes back to the parents. Clearly, parents have to be involved and take a serious measure of responsibility for the life-styles of their children.

To a considerable extent, parents are role models for their children's life choices—for diet and eating patterns, for what they do with their leisure time, and for life-style choices for physical fitness along the way.

Always, a hands-on approach is most effective: eating together as families (whenever possible), exercising together as well, and organizing our time in ways that promote physical fitness and social interaction.

Our kids don't need every version of the most *hot* new game or high-tech gadget. And easily, at an early age, they can be introduced to activities and events that require daily/weekly exercise and social involvement. Moreover, when needed, parents can negotiate desired behaviors with their children to better insure healthy life-styles—life-styles that will carry them well into adulthood.

In reflecting on all of this, the key remains the early engagement between parent and child. Early on, patterns need to be set for healthy life-choices to where, over time, they're simply taken for granted.

Trends in child/youth obesity will reverse the moment parents step up and say, *enough* and back it up with a renewed commitment to hands-on parenting and a more healthy life-style for both them and their children.