

Men's Health

TONS OF
USEFUL STUFF

Turn Down The TV

Four teaching tools to combat childhood obesity and overweight

By: Jamie Bellavance

Television may be a parent's best babysitter, but it comes with a hefty cost per hour. Along with the popularity of television shows and video games, an epidemic of childhood obesity and overweight has arrived.

"There's significant data that the more time a child spends in front of screens; computer, TV, or video screens, the greater the chances that that child will be overweight," says John Whyte, M.D., M.P.H., Vice President of the Discovery Health Channel.

Today, more than 16 percent of children and adolescents ages 6-19 years are overweight, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. That's a 45 percent increase from 10 years ago. The study also indicates that 33 percent of all U.S. children watch four or more hours of television each day—and these children weighed more than children who watched less than two hours per day.

But not all TV is Bad TV

"Television is never going to go out of style, but we have the choice of what we are going to show our children," says Dr. Valerie Mokides, an Osteopathic Pediatrician in New Hyde Park, Long Island.

On September 4, select PBS stations nationwide will launch *Kid Fitness*, a new children's interactive television series created by Paul Neville, award-winning fitness trainer for 20 years. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Agency is also using TV to reach kids through two DVDs (produced by Discovery Health and fitTV) that teach about smart eating habits and physical activity.

Max's Magical Delivery: Fit For Kids is a DVD designed for children ages 5 to 9. Parents can order it for free at www.Ahrq.gov/child. The 30-minute show encourages kids to find fun ways to be energetic inside and outside through interactive activities like jumping rope, skipping, and playing sports. In the last scene, kids abandon the TV, grab basketballs and baseball bats, and run out the door to go play outside.

PBS's *Kid Fitness* also encourages kids ages 2-8 to be active by moving like the animals of the jungle. Kids won't be sitting like a log on the couch. They'll be on their feet following *Kid Fitness* (played by *Men's Health* model Jarred Sper) as he flaps his wings like Brenda the Butterfly, hops around like a frog, and moves his arms and legs like Markey the Monkey. For airing information, parents should call 1-800-354-0385.

"Parents often sit the kids in front of the TV to get some time for themselves," says Neville. "*Kid Fitness* is a way for parents to get some free time and get the kids to be productive."

Course of Action

If parents are looking for other ways to learn how to incorporate exercise and healthy eating into their family lifestyle, consider the book *Lean Mom, Fit Family*. The book lays out a six-week program of sample meal plans for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks, and includes activities the family can do together to maintain a healthy weight. Click here for meal suggestions and activity plans from the book.

Another resource is *We Can!*, a parent handbook from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that gives adults ways to enhance children's activity and nutrition. Parents can order the handbook for free from the *We Can!* Website. http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan_mats/parent_hb_en.htm. The handbook says that consuming 150 calories—the amount in a soda or a small bag of chips—more than you burn each day can lead to a 10-pound gain in a year. Prevent weight gain by balancing extra treats with added activity—go for a 2-mile walk or play hoops for 30 minutes. Other hints include reducing calories in by drinking water instead of juice and substituting whole fruit for gummy fruit snacks.

All of these tools suggest that every little bit helps. The important thing is to avoid focusing on "diet" or "exercise" like it's hard work. Make it fun. Get the kids moving and help each other make every meal a little healthier. Trainer Paul Neville says, "If kids begin to exercise at an early age, they will stick with it and improve their health and quality of life forever."

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