

Battling Childhood Obesity – The Difference Between Your Child’s Good Health and Unhealthy Body Weight

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There is an alarming health trend among Hispanic/Latino youth living in the U.S.: Growing rates of obesity and related health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, elevated blood cholesterol and blood pressure are negatively affecting the health and well-being.¹ The Hispanic/Latino community must be made aware of the fact that being overweight or obese goes hand in hand with these diseases. This is certainly a problem among adults, but more and more, Hispanic/Latino children are also showing signs of these serious health problems.

Approximately 30.3 percent of children (6 to 11) are overweight and 15.3 percent are obese. Among adolescents (ages 12 to 19), 30.4 percent are overweight and 15.5 percent are obese. These numbers are even more dramatic when compared to Mexican American children of whom 39.3 percent are overweight and 23.7 percent are obese. Among Mexican American adolescents, 43.8 percent are overweight and 23.4 percent are obese.² Furthermore, Hispanic/Latino adolescents born in the U.S. to immigrant parents are more than twice as likely to be overweight as their foreign-born peers who move to the U.S.³

There are many possible reasons for these alarming statistics. Among them is the impact of acculturation. More than ever, Hispanic/Latino parents and children are incorporating high-fat, low-nutrient fast food into their diets instead of traditional foods. The fact that many times both parents are working outside of the home means that they are unable to closely monitor the quality of food eaten by their kids. Additionally, Hispanic/Latinos aren’t as active as they used to be. There is a greater reliance on cars or public transportation, and walking or riding bikes to work or school isn’t as common as it was even 20 years ago. Furthermore, there has been a surge in the amount of time children are spending watching TV and playing video games instead of playing outside.

Within the Hispanic/Latino community there is a misperception of what it means to be “healthy.” Among many Hispanic/Latinos, the concept of “health” often consists of having enough to eat and lack of illness. The importance of balanced and nutritious eating and being active is often overlooked.

Physical and group activity is an important part of a child’s healthy lifestyle. However, the relationship between physical activity and long-term health benefits is not often recognized by many in the Hispanic/Latino community.⁴ It must be made abundantly clear: Participation in physical activities, in combination with good nutrition, is absolutely necessary to maintain good health and prevent obesity among children.

How Parents Can Help Children Be Healthy

One of the most important things you can do is focus on increasing the amount of physical activity in their lives. Encourage your children to try new activities and support their participation in these pursuits.

This may be challenging to some children, especially if activity hasn't been a part of their lives in the past. If your children haven't been active before now, encourage them to start by spending 30 minutes a day with activities they enjoy and work up to 60 minutes a day. There are so many things that you can encourage children to do, some of which are suggested here:

- Walk or ride bikes to school
- Join a local soccer team or dance class
- Play basketball with friends

Additional ways to help your child build healthy habits include:

- Eat meals as a family
- Participate in physical activity as a family
- Limit TV viewing to no more than 2 hours per day. Children who watch more TV are less like to engage in activity.⁵
- Keep the TV out of your child's bedroom. Studies show that children with televisions in their rooms watch more TV.
- Monitor what your children eat while watching TV – the amount of food consumed tends to increase with TV viewing.⁶
- Model good, healthy behaviors such as good food choices and regular physical activity
- Take turns with neighborhood parents to supervise their play

VERB™ Ponte las Pilas.

VERB is a campaign that aims to get 9-13 year-olds, also known as “tweens,” to be more active. VERB motivates tweens to find their own VERB or try a new one, whether it's running, playing soccer, dancing, or doing any other positive physical activity they already enjoy or want to try. VERB is made possible by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Let's work together to encourage and support children's participation in positive physical activity and give the Hispanic/Latino community yet another reason to be proud.

For more information, visit www.VERBparents.com

ADDENDUM

FOOTNOTES:

1. Statement on Diabetes, 1999 Congressional Hispanic Caucus Hearing
2. National Center for Health Statistics, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Cynthia L. Ogden, Katherine M. Flegal, Margaret D. Carroll, and Clifford L. Johnson. JAMA. 2002; 288:1728-1732.
3. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, J Nutr. 1998 Apr;128(4):701-6.
4. GarciaLKS 360° focus groups, 2002
5. Annenberg School of Public Policy, 2000, Philadelphia, PA

6. Journal of the American Medical Association, 1998; 279: 959-60