



Childhood obesity: Mealtime, or battleground?

By IRIS HERSH Staff writer

First Lady Michele Obama wants American to take a closer look at the critical issue of childhood obesity.

She isn't alone.

With childhood obesity at epidemic levels, health professionals believe it's vital for people to develop a healthy relationship with food early in life to alleviate this serious health issue

University of Michigan psychotherapist and author Marilyn Ann Migliore says one's early childhood experiences are key to one's lifetime relationship with food.

In her book, "The Hunger Within," Migliore explains that messages that young children receive about food, eating and body weight determine the role food will play in their lives.

A local dietitian believes parents are responsible for the way their children approach food and eating.

"Feeding is a form of parenting," said Patricia Carey, a clinical dietitian at Summit Health Improvement Center in Chambersburg, an affiliate of Summit Health. A registered dietitian

and licensed dietitian nutritionist, she has a bachelor's degree in food and nutrition science and dietetics and a doctoral degree in food science.

"Parents have certain roles and the child has certain roles," she added.

A parent's responsibility is the what, when and where of eating, including what kinds of foods are planned, purchased and prepared for meals. Carey encourages sit-down family meals, saying that parents and children all coming to the table to eat together is a form of bonding.

"The family meal is important to reconnect the family after its members have been away from each other all day," Carey said.

She cited research that shows that children from families who have family meals generally have healthier diet and weight status. Parents should put various foods on the table and children should decide which items they want and how much of each, she said.

"The child needs to feel in control of eating," Carey said. She believes parents should have structured meal and snack times and should be in charge of what's offered during those feeding times. Children should get three meals a day and two to three snacks to fulfill nutritional needs.

Carey said it's important for parents to include familiar foods their children have a history of eating, but children should have the right to

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choose which parts of a meal they want and which they don't want. Dessert, she said, is just part of the meal and should not be a reward for eating the meal.

"If a parent puts a food hurdle in front of the dessert such as, 'You must eat six green beans before you can have dessert' or 'Eat everything on your plate to be entitled to dessert,' this may create someone who overeats dessert anytime she has an opportunity to do so. The parent is forming a habit based on a bad eating practice," Carey said.

By forcing children to eat a food they don't want, they're not learning to like that food, they're learning to like the dessert.

"Forcing children to eat certain foods or restraining them from eating others can also contribute to eating disorders," she continued. "We want to help our children develop their own internal self-regulation regarding eating."

Carey believes that parents interferes with that self-regulation when they externally try to control the child's eating patterns.

"We want children to be good eaters, which means they can take care of their food needs in a matter-of-fact way," she said.

Children, particularly pre-school age, are very erratic and unpredictable about the foods they'll eat. One day they may like something and the next day they won't.

That's normal, Carey said, adding that a parent's job is to offer new foods one at a time by pairing them with familiar foods.

"The division of responsibility is important," Carey said. "Once a parent crosses the division of responsibility, unhealthy behaviors may be set up that can contribute to obesity."

If a child chooses not to eat a meal that's fine, she said, but the child has to understand he won't get any food until the next scheduled meal or snack.

Healthy role model

Children will follow the lead of adults they see every day. By eating fruits and vegetables and not overindulging in less nutritious snacks, parents will send the right message.

Another way to be a role model is to serve appropriate portions and not overeat. Talk about your feelings of fullness, especially with younger children: "This is delicious, but I'm full, so I'm going to stop eating."

Try to keep a positive approach about food. Parents who are always dieting or complaining about their bodies may foster these same negative feelings in their children.

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