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Are You Raising a Couch Potato?

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Seven-year-old Owen*, the son of Armonk resident Patrick M.* and his wife, Colleen*, is naturally very active. "Owen is into a variety of different sports," says Patrick. "He takes tennis lessons once a week, plays baseball in the summer and basketball in the winter, and last Christmas he tried snowboarding for the first time, at Stratton Mountain in Vermont." (*Names changed to protect privacy.)

He's also slim, his father says—a result due, in part, to the fact that this Coman Hill Elementary School 2nd-grader is constantly on the move—yet Patrick adds that Owen and his 18-month-old brother, Tommy*, are like their parents in the sense that they enjoy eating vegetables, don't particularly like junk food, and have no real problem maintaining healthy weights. For these reasons, Patrick considers himself fortunate.

He has plenty of peers whose children love McDonald's chicken nuggets, or who aren't quite as active—and still others who struggle because weight problems seem to have been passed down hereditarily. "We know that obesity genes do exist," says Mary Ellen Renna, MD, a pediatrician at the North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, New York, and author of *Growing Up Healthy the Next Generation Way: Add Years to Your Child's Life and Life to Your Child's Years*. "There are a few genes that can contribute to an individual becoming more overweight, even if he or she follows a diet that is identical to that of someone else."

That's what worried Bronxville resident Marla Past a few years ago. This mother of two says that she was obese as a child—"I weighed close to 200 pounds when I was in the 3rd grade"—and when she saw her older daughter, Amanda*, start to put on weight, part of her believed it was caused by inherited genes. "It upset me," says Past, "because I developed an eating disorder as a result of my obesity, and this is something I have struggled with for most of my adult life. Obviously, I don't want to be the food police for my daughter—yet at the same time, I don't want her to suffer the way I did, on

Nutrition Counts

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-Resist buying unhealthy snacks. If they're not in the pantry, no one can give in to the temptation. Try replacing potato chips with nuts or seeds, cookies with cut-up fruit, and ice cream with low-fat cheese or frozen yogurt.

-Teach kids about proper nutrition. Experts say these conversations should begin when children are young and continue through high school. "Teens are especially interested in learning the specifics," says Dr. Mary Ellen Renna, a pediatrician at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, New York. "They'll want to know, for example, that omega-3 fatty acids (most commonly found in fish) will reduce the risk of heart disease."

-Be a role model. It's tough to ask your child to snack on an apple if you're reaching for a Twinkie! Follow the same good nutrition guidelines that you teach your kids, and let them see you making time to work out—or find ways to get fit together. Your good example will teach the importance of exercise throughout life.

account of being overweight.”

Past’s concern is understandable, but experts say that genetics alone cannot be held responsible for an issue that is fast becoming a national epidemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), behavioral and environmental factors are also to blame for the fact that in the United States, 16 percent of children ages 6 to 19 are overweight. Or, put another way, one in five kids currently runs the risk of developing cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, asthma, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, or psychosocial disorders as a result of being overweight. Since the 1970s, the percentage of overweight kids has doubled among 2- to 5-year-olds and tripled among kids ages 6 to 19.

And no child is immune. “This is an issue that transcends socioeconomic, gender, and cultural barriers,” says Stephen J. Virgilio, PhD, professor and chair of the department of health studies, physical education, and human performance sciences at Adelphi University in Garden City. Even if your child is at an appropriate weight for his height and age, you’ll want to keep reading, since good health is more than a number on the scale. “Every body, at every age, needs to move and be fed well,” notes Dr. Renna. To raise healthy kids who won’t become couch potatoes, it’s important to “begin talking to them about exercise and nutrition when they’re young,” she says. It’s never too early to lay the foundation for a lifetime of good habits—and never too late to start.

OBESITY DEFINED

Parents can generally tell, simply by looking at their children, if the effects of too much junk food and too many hours in front of the Sony PlayStation have begun to show. But when it comes to officially determining whether or not a child is overweight, pediatricians use something called the Body Mass Index (BMI), which measures body fat. To determine BMI, a doctor first weighs and measures your child, then uses a BMI calculator that takes into account age, sex, height, and weight. The resulting figure is interpreted using a chart that shows which percentile your child’s BMI number falls into, relative to other children of the same sex and age. If your child falls under the 5th percentile, she’s considered underweight. Between the 5th and 85th percentiles, she is of a healthy weight. If she is between the 85th and 95th percentiles, she is termed overweight. In the 95th percentile and over? Your daughter is considered obese, at risk of experiencing numerous health consequences, and 70 percent more likely to carry that obesity—along with its accompanying hazardous side effects—into adulthood, according to the CDC.

“Kids are getting fatter, faster now than at any other time in our history,” says Sharron Dalton, PhD, a New York University nutrition professor and author of *Our Overweight Children: What Parents, Schools, and Communities Can Do to Control the Fatness Epidemic*. She and other experts attribute the rise in obesity to two main factors.

Children are, first and foremost, less mobile than they were 20 to 40 years ago. The rise and use of machines—computers, TVs, video games, and cell phones—has contributed to the decline in physical activity. “When I was growing up, I had to walk outside and ring a neighbor’s doorbell if I wanted to hang out with friends,” says Dr. Renna. Now, according to Virgilio, kids spend an average of four hours per day sitting in front of a screen—but it’s not entirely the kids’ idea to stay at home, parked in front of the TV or computer. Many parents, fearing kidnappers and other predators, often discourage their kids from playing outside after school, especially when the guardians themselves are still at work and unable to supervise.

But lack of exercise is only part of the problem. Toddlers, tots, and teenagers are also consuming more processed, nutrient-deficient, calorie-dense foods than ever. “Some kids never even taste water,” says Dalton, noting the sugary fruit juices and sodas they drink instead. Need more proof about the ill effects of the typical American diet? “Obesity is increasing at a great rate in developing countries as those citizens start to consume the processed, high-fat foods Americans have been exposed to for decades,” notes Dr. Renna.

The solution to reducing childhood overweight—and to improving the well-being of healthy-weight children—is easy to describe, though not always easy to follow: Kids need to exercise each day and eat a well-balanced diet based on the Department of Agriculture’s Food Guide Pyramid

(mypyramid.gov). If they did that, “parents should never again have to mention the word ‘diet,’” says Karin Sadow, MD, the director of PM Pediatrics in Mamaroneck, an after-hours facility that offers emergency pediatric care. Dr. Sadow, who has treated a wide variety of illnesses and injuries, from ear infections to wounds requiring stitches, says that overweight or obese children are more likely to break their bones as a result of routine falls. “Anytime I see a heavier child in need of an X-ray, I know—even before I perform my examination—that he or she has probably fractured a bone, because extra weight would have landed on that extremity,” she says. “With lighter children, I’m never sure whether there will be a fracture.”

RAISING FIT KIDS

While it’s obvious that children need exercise, what’s not so obvious is how much they actually require on a daily basis for optimal health. What follows is a breakdown, age by age:

Kids ages 2 to 3 should get at least 30 minutes of structured physical activity—meaning adult-led or organized—and at least 60 minutes of unstructured or “free play” time each day, according to the National Association of Sports and Physical Education (NASPE). Children ages 3 to 5 should get at least 60 minutes of structured and 60 minutes of unstructured physical playtime each day. While the notion of daily exercise for on-the-go toddlers and preschoolers might seem like a no-brainer, these guidelines can provide a good measuring stick for parents to use when, for example, assessing a preschool or other child-care program. It’s worth asking any potential caregiver how much physical activity will be incorporated into each day.

Once kids reach school age, they need at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day, according to NASPE. For some children, reading a novel or playing Xbox may be more enjoyable than participating in a sport, but there are still ways parents can help get their kids motivated about exercise. “Offer a wide range of options,” says Stephen Virgilio, the Adelphi University professor, “and don’t push karate if your daughter shows an interest in dance.” You can also keep it simple, by taking a family stroll after dinner. “Walking on a regular basis, at a steadily high level of speed, is a great way to stay in shape,” says Robert Gotlin, a New City physician who also recommends incorporating fitness into one’s everyday activities, by climbing stairs rather than riding escalators, or asking kids to help carry in groceries after Mom goes shopping.

One mom who’s had fitness on her mind from the very start is Marla Past. In order to battle her eating disorder and overcome her own childhood obesity, she began to follow a low-glycemic diet and exercise on a regular basis—“without going nuts,” she says. Last September, she opened Underground Fitness in Scarsdale, a facility that specializes in weight management and exercise for kids ages 10 to 18. “My older daughter was one of my motivating forces for founding this center,” says Past, who wanted to provide a safe haven where overweight children (and parents) could learn about nutrition and start to move their bodies in a variety of enjoyable, high-intensity ways. This 5,000-square-foot exercise-and-play center has a funky vibe (Past and her husband also own a nightclub in New York City, on which they modeled much of Underground Fitness’s décor and lighting), and offers a cardio room with treadmills, elliptical machines, and PlayStation bikes—you need to pedal fast in order to make the virtual car move around the track—as well as boxing, Pilates, and ab-strengthening classes, all designed for tweens and teens. “I’ve seen 11-year-olds walk in here weighing 220 pounds,” says Past, “and their lives are so destroyed. They’re constantly ridiculed and ostracized by peers. My goal is to help all my kids—from those who are obese to those who just need a bit of exercise—build strength, balance, flexibility, self-esteem, and social skills.” When Past first opened the center, she had only a few dozen members. Now, as kids and parents have learned to trust they won’t be teased as they work out in this nurturing space, her membership has grown to a couple of hundred children.

By the time teenagers enter high school, they should be physically active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week, according to Virgilio. Many parents mistakenly think that if their son or daughter has signed up for a school sport, he or she is getting enough exercise and they no longer need to worry. “The reality is quite the opposite,” says Dr. Gotlin, who coaches six Little League teams throughout Rockland County. “The more organized the activity, the less physically active it truly is.” How could this be? As Dr. Gotlin explains, with organized sports, kids aren’t necessarily getting much playing time, especially if they’re not top

players. "I've seen how often kids are forced to sit on the sidelines when participating in a competitive team sport," he says.

To compensate, more and more parents are turning to organizations like Backyard Sports, founded by Scarsdale resident and father of two Danny Bernstein. "I grew tired of observing that kids were no longer players, but participants in adult-controlled programs," says Bernstein. "I wanted to bring joy back to sports so that children could get a great workout, gain confidence, and be inspired to come back and play the games." Through his eight-week sessions—led by a soccer coach and basketball instructor Vin Minotti, who also works as a health-education teacher at Mamaroneck High School—kids from Pre-K to grade 8 have the opportunity to run around for an hour to an hour and a half each week. Following an aerobic warm-up activity, they then participate in noncompetitive soccer and basketball games held at various facilities around Westchester, such as the gym at SUNY–Purchase. And yet, despite the fact that Bernstein says he keeps the kids "constantly active," he too has noted a rise in childhood weight. What's behind this trend? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that after practice, he sees kids snacking on cheese doodles and Gatorade. "Gatorade was originally designed as a replenishment drink for professional athletes, and 30 years ago, my friends and I hated the taste," says Bernstein. "Now it's been loaded up with fructose, to make it tasty for kids. Somehow, we have to get them out of the habit of consuming sugar-based drinks and donuts. We need to start getting them excited about healthier snack options."

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Can parents assume their children will get the minimum amount of exercise needed each day? Not if they're going by the NASPE standard, which is higher than those set by the New York State Education Department. The Education Department requires school districts to provide the following: Kids in grades K to 3 are supposed to get exercise each day for a total of 120 minutes per week (not counting recess); 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-graders are supposed to get physical-education instruction "not less than three times a week"; and kids in grades 7 through 12 are required to participate in phys ed "not less than three times a week in one semester, and not less than two times per week in the other semester." The same 120-minutes-per-week total applies to all grades.

Vin Minotti says that Mamaroneck High School students attend phys-ed class three times a week, which does fulfill the Department of Education requirement, and he believes that for the most part Westchester County schools are doing a good job of keeping their students as physically active as possible during the day.

Westchester County is also taking steps to increase kids' opportunities for exercise—and good nutrition—during the school day. Called the Fit Kids campaign, this program (under the aegis of the Westchester County Department of Health) was launched in March 2003 and distributed as a step-by-step guide to the county's 47 school districts. Focusing on the key areas of physical activity and nutrition, the program doesn't consist of a long list of rules for schools to implement. "Through a series of events with partners in the community, we want to encourage people of all ages to eat healthier and be more active," says Carrie Aaron-Young, Director of the Bureau of Community Nutrition Services within the Department of Health. "We go to the schools and assist them in developing wellness policies, then serve as facilitators to help them implement those policies and create environments that support fitness and good eating."

So far 37 Westchester schools have signed up to participate in the Fit Kids program. Where fitness is concerned, the team's accomplishments include using funds to purchase pedometers so that kids can count the steps they take, which makes walking a bit more fun, and sending jump ropes and balls to classrooms so that kids have active toys to play with during recess. The program also created the concept of "Wellness Wednesdays," encouraging schools to serve heart-healthy meals on this day every week and providing all participating schools with complimentary copies of *Cooking for the Heart*, a collection of easy-to-prepare recipes. Fit Kids also urges schools to implement self-serve salad bars and sends materials to schools asking students to participate in the "No Junk Food Week," which usually takes place in March. The Richard J. Bailey Elementary School in Greenburgh is just one example (and there are many) of a school whose kids have

benefited as a result of the program. "They modified their lunch schedule to allow for more active playtime," says Aaron-Young. "That was something they did on their own, after receiving material and information from Fit Kids."

Parents and kids are clearly getting the message that sedentary lifestyles and a preponderance of highly processed foods can take a toll on kids' (and parents'!) waistlines. "In my home we're all aware of how important it is to eat well and stay active," says Marla Past, the Bronxville mom. "It's a lifestyle choice, and I'm leading by example. You can't change your habits overnight, but I'm living proof that a change can be made if you exercise regularly and treat your body well. It isn't always easy. But it's such an important battle, and one in which we all have to be good warriors."

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Snack Attack

Check out these healthier alternatives to satisfy kids' between-meal cravings.

Instead of: 3 cups buttered popcorn, 160 Calories

Try: 3 cups fat-free air-popped corn, 85 Calories

Instead of: 1 serving potato chips (14) with 2 tb. onion dip, 260 Calories

Try: 1 serving baked tortilla chips (12) with 1/2 cup salsa, 150 Calories

Instead of: 1 oz. cheddar cheese and 6 Saltine crackers, 200 Calories

Try: 1 stick low-fat string cheese and 1 small apple, 160 Calories

Instead of: 3 Oreo cookies, 160 Calories

Try: 4 gingersnap cookies, 130 Calories

Instead of: 1 oz. crackers, like Cheese Nips, 130 Calories

Try: 1 cup celery or carrot sticks, 30 Calories

Source: Louise Gilbert, a Weight Watchers Leader at the center in Yorktown Heights.