

Fighting childhood obesity in America

BY JENNY TORGERSON

Obesity has undeniably become an issue for modern American children. According to First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move Campaign" (www.letsmove.gov), obesity rates in America have tripled over the past year, leading to one in every three children becoming overweight or obese. Greater accessibility to junk food, commercial marketing, and increased portion size have all contributed to this trend.

In the idyll of early 20th century America, meals were home-cooked, people walked to work or school or the store, snacks were an infrequent treat, and vegetables were offered with every meal. As the "Let's Move Campaign" documents, within the past few decades, Americans have shifted away from these trends, and American children now lead a more sedentary lifestyle.

According to McDonalds.com, the fast-food giant serves meals to more than 70 million customers each day. In 1954, only one McDonald's restaurant existed; now, more than 35,000 are in operation around the globe. And while companies like McDonald's are increasingly striving to offer healthy menu options, Americans

continue to choose sugary, high-fat, fried food options.

Fortunately, awareness about this issue is spreading and parents and teachers are taking a more active role in guiding children to make healthier lifestyle choices. At my school, children are not permitted to bring sweets or fatty snacks in their lunches; the administration strives to provide healthy, natural snack and lunch options; and nutrition and exercise are both incorporated into the classroom curriculum. These shifts have all been made in an attempt to lower obesity rates and improve children's overall health.

Author and child health advocate Merilee A. Kern encourages good decision making with her new book, "Making Healthy Choices: A Story to Inspire Fit, Weight-Wise Kids." The book targets children ages 7 to 14 and is intended to be read with a parent. The author strives to help readers recognize negative choices and get on the right track for a lifetime of healthy living. Kern's book comes in two versions: one with a female protagonist and one with a male protagonist. A self-described fitness enthusiast, Kern hopes that the book will provide a non-combative way for parents to open up a dialogue about healthy choices with their children.

"Making Healthy Choices" speaks to many American parents who are struggling to encourage their children to choose nutritious foods. Rebecca Welch, teacher and mother of two daughters, ages 3 and 6 months, says she thinks it is important to "keep introducing children to healthy foods, even if they don't want to try them at first." This philosophy can often lead to a battle of wills between child and parent. Welch says she combats that struggle by "eating and enjoying the same healthy foods" in front of her children. Kern's writing can bolster the efforts of parents like Welch and provide them with another tool in their arsenal against unhealthy eating.

Books such as Kern's, and the First Lady's initiative to get kids moving, combined with the individual efforts of parents and school administrators, are making a dent in the national obesity problem, but we all still have a long way to go. Hopefully, over the next several decades, we will see a national shift to more active lifestyles and nutrient-rich foods from the past.

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