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## Taking a bite out of childhood obesity

Tips to get your kids healthy and fit. *by Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I am watching my children get heavier through middle school, and they think I'm nagging. What can I do to help them?

A: Your concern is one shared by many parents. In a culture where the "muffin top" is a fashion statement, childhood obesity has become epidemic. The physical health challenges these young people face for the rest of their life are tragic. Moreover, growing up fat creates unnecessary social and emotional tests. Growing up is hard enough without obesity!

Here are some ways you can help your kids:

Buy healthier foods, one product at a time. Switch to organic, natural peanut butter instead of Jiff or Skippy. Buy 100% fruit juices and whole fruits. Buy unsweetened breakfast cereals and put the sugar bowl back on the table—there's just no way they can add as much as the pre-sugared cereals contain!

Start reading labels with your kids. Increase your awareness about what products contain unhealthy stuff like high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated fats and scary words you can't even pronounce.

Here's an exercise kids find fun in our hands-on science "Learning Lab": Find an empty pop bottle, a funnel and a sugar bowl. With a teaspoon let your child guess how much table sugar his favorite soda contains. Then do the math together, remembering that 5 grams equals one teaspoon. Empty the bottle and fill again, counting the accurate number of teaspoons. What a visual! I think you'll both be surprised.

Next, remember that family meals don't have to be "convenient". Preparing fresh foods is a loving act of service to your family. Try letting each person in your family prepare a meal each week. Teaching how to cook a healthy meal is a gift in itself. Increasing the number of fresh fruits and veggies your child eats will reduce the handfuls of junk food they grab. Leaving a full fruit bowl on the counter helps—and arranging cut fruit or veggies on a plate is even more enticing.

Reducing portion size is another way to combat the bulge. Start serving meals on smaller plates. Seriously! You may get some moans and groans at first, but remind your kids, that they can have more if they are still hungry. You will be surprised in a short time, how many more leftovers you are refrigerating for tomorrow's snack.

Don't forget exercise. Pry your kids away from texting and Facebook to increase his or her steps-per-day. Take a walk together, set up a badminton net or a tetherball pole. Play croquet or shoot hoops together. Adding good habits is just like erasing bad ones—it happens one day at a time. Research says the average person can build or break a habit with 21 days of repeated behavior. Start today—you can do it!