How can we alleviate childhood obesity?

Between the candy binge that is Halloween, the incessant gobbling that is Thanksgiving, and the flurry of food that fuels the resolutions of the new year, it’s a good time to think about obesity. Obesity is particularly worrisome in kids, since it can lead to habits and diseases (like diabetes) that are difficult to reverse in adulthood. What can be done?

For next time: What’s your secret weapon in the classroom?

Send responses, as well as suggestions for future questions, to sage@edutopia.org, or visit Sage Advice on the Web at www.edutopia.org/sageadvice. (Responses may be edited for length and style.)

* Families need to reestablish a sit-down meal together. Rituals like this will keep kids from eating high-sugar, high-fat foods that serve as substitutes for what they really need—love and nurturing from their family.

  At school, staff members need to model good dietary and lifestyle habits. If kids see teachers walk through the cafeteria with a candy bar and soda for lunch, they believe that’s acceptable.

  LI SA H O U K, L A N G U A G E A R T S C O N S U L T A N T
  L A P E E R C O U N T Y, M I C H I G A N

1. “Undersize Me” and eliminate sugared soda pop.
2. Make certain that the adults in their lives do the same.
3. Give kids recess twice a day.

D A N I E L M A N S O O R, G O O D W O R K S G R O U P
N E W Y O R K, N E W Y O R K

* One of the most telling stories I have heard came in a fourth-grade discussion of the appropriateness of vending machines in elementary schools. A student said that her neighbor drove her kids to school each day, stopping at the convenience store to buy them candies and pastries for breakfast. The mother felt she could not afford regular food most of the time, so she was treating the kids to the candy breakfast. The candy breakfast increased the mom’s self-esteem as a provider. Did her children gain weight? Yeah. They did.

  T E R R Y B L A K E L Y, T E A C H E R
  K N O X V I L L E, T E N N E S S E E

* Exercise should be something that kids do because they are having fun and not because it is part of the school curriculum. Think about skaters, those kids that you see in the parking lots doing tricks on their skateboards. They are really fit and healthy and they stay in shape. They don’t like gyms and they despise diets because they think they are shallow. (I know about this because I used to be one of those kids.) They just stay fit because they are having fun with their friends, and health is just a by-product of fun.

  N E W Y O R K, N E W Y O R K

* Create the mindset that good health comes in many shapes and forms, as do beauty and athletic ability.

A few ideas for parents: act out a story as you read it; have a five-minute pillow fight and let the kids win; exercise as a family; play Twister, Simon Says, Mother May I?, or Red Light, Green Light; find safe places to take a walk; find hobbies that would mean watching 15–30 minutes less television each day, such as drawing, reading, playing board games, playing with blocks, telling stories from your childhood, and looking at photographs of the children growing up.

S E L E D I A S H E P H E R D B A I L E Y
P A R E N T V O L U N T E E R
W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

T H R E E W O R D S:
U N P L U G T H E TV.

R O S S W E T H E R H O R N
A D V O C A T E O F T H E L A W P R O J E C T
F O R P S Y C H I A T R I C R I G H T S
A N C H O R A G E, A L A S K A
Schoolchildren are overweight because of our school system’s obsession with extreme structure and standardized testing. Many elementary schools do not have playgrounds. Recess, when children could run around, jump, climb, and play freely, has often been eliminated. The first substitute for recess has been PE—organized group activity (often competitive games) where many children stand around waiting their turn or avoiding it so they do not look like fools.

Kids sit all day. Then they go to more organized confinement, like after-school programs, or home, where they are burdened with homework, another cause of obesity. They get little opportunity just to go out and play, climb a tree, run, or throw a few baskets. It’s always, Get ready for a test, get your homework done, structure, structure, structure. So when they get an unstructured moment, kids watch TV and eat.

_Rhonda Browning, Special-Education Teacher_  
_New Orleans, Louisiana_

Parents seem to think that children need to be overly protected and drive children to the bus stop (sometimes less than a block). Or kids refuse to play outside because it’s too hot, or too cold, whatever. Schools forget that play is the way children learn about real life. Sitting in a chair doing schoolwork is not always the best way to improve your test scores.

_Mari Ann Bihr, Health and Physical-Education Consultant_  
_Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education_  
_Jefferson City, Missouri_

*Quit celebrating every single event with food.*

_Vivian M. Dimmel, Sixth-Grade Teacher_  
_Syracuse, New York_

Your grandmother’s grandmother would most likely have picked fresh vegetables out of her garden or a community farm. Families would buy their meats from a local butcher shop and spend hours preparing the meal. The soil was rich in vitamins and nutrients, the produce was pesticide free, and the meat was from animals that roamed in the grass and were not fed steroids and growth hormones.

Now we make fast food, devour fast food in the car, in front of the TV, and on the run. There are some solutions: Petition to get water and healthier vending options in your school. Create assignments that involve following the trail of food, from how it’s grown all the way to how it ends up on the grocery store shelf. Create school projects like writing letters to your local congressperson to demand more organic, unaltered food in the schools. Grow a school garden and prepare a meal from it. Bring an awareness of chemicals, pesticides, and bioengineered produce to class. Such courses can cross over into math, science, and history.

_Sandy Fox, Cosmic Clubhouse Productions_  
_Los Angeles, California_