

"LifeTimes" is published bi-monthly on recycled paper by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois, 300 East Randolph St., Chicago, IL 60601.

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Printed by Blue Island Newspaper Printing

where awareness and prevention meet

Make smarter choices about childhood obesity: Visit www.besmartbewell.com

Charmaine Hussain

Of course you want to spoil your grandchildren. But with childhood obesity climbing at alarming rates, think twice before heading out for ice cream or indulging their whims at the candy store.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey shows a sharp increase in obesity over the last 30 years, rising 7.4 percent for children ages 2 to 5, 10.5 percent for kids 6 to 11 and 12.6 percent for those 12 to 19.

Why such a severe spike? It's a perfect storm of modern convenience: the prevalence of inexpensive snacks containing high levels of sugar and fat, the wild popularity of sedentary inventions like video games and drive-through windows, more television channels than ever and even the fear of crime, which can keep kids cloistered indoors instead of playing in the streets until dusk.

But children and their caretakers can fight back. Maintaining a healthy weight can help them avoid serious, lifelong health issues directly linked to childhood obesity. They include heart disease, type 2 diabetes (cited by many health experts as reaching epidemic proportions in children), asthma, sleep apnea and even alienation and teasing from peers.

The most frightening prospect is that your grandchildren's generation may experience more health problems and have a shorter life expectancy than your own.

Turning things around

So how can you help your grandchildren or other young family members maintain or achieve a healthy weight? Try these tricks:

1 Turn the idea of making more healthy versions of foods into a game. Can you bake French fries and have them taste as good as those you fry? Should you leave the skins on or off? How long should you leave them in the oven? Involve your grandchildren and invite them to speculate. Act like it's a scientific experiment; they may at least be curious enough to sample the results.

2 Treat soda like wine. Explain that some foods "go with" soda, just as some foods go with red or white wine (pizza comes to mind as particularly compatible with soda). The standard beverage at your table should be water or milk, with soda as an occasional treat.

3 Send children outside. If they claim they're bored, great – the most memorable fantasies and games usually spring from absolute boredom. Encourage them to climb trees, dig a hole to the center of the Earth (watch for gas and sprinkler lines!) or play with the garden hose.

4 Don't give up if your grandchildren don't like a food the first time they try it. According to some nutrition studies, it can take 10 or 20 exposures before children accept a food. The key is to keep trying—and show the kids that you enjoy the food yourself.

5 This formula from the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children can help you monitor your grandchildren's food and exercise:

5-4-3-2-1-Go!

- 5** servings of fruits and vegetables a day
- 4** servings of water
- 3** servings of low-fat dairy products
- 2** or less hours of screen time a day (video games and television)
- 1** or more hours of physical activity

You'll find this formula and many more **Habits to Have®** that can help prevent childhood obesity on www.besmartbewell.com, an online resource about health issues sponsored by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, Divisions of Health Care Service Corporation, a Mutual Legal Reserve Company. The childhood obesity page at www.besmartbewell.com also features first-person videos (with transcripts) and more tips about changing children's eating habits and activity level. ■



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