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News Release

## **Child-Proofing Obesity**

With mounting responsibilities and daily duties on the average parent's plate, many families across the nation are engrossed in a battle of balancing demands and taking the proper steps within the war on childhood obesity. As this health issue has become an epidemic, re-evaluating "plates," "balance," "steps" and the "war" at hand are imperative to the current welfare and future of the nation's youth. Research shows childhood obesity has tripled from 5 to 15 percent in the past twenty-five years; and experts project another 15 percent of children are currently at risk. Within Alabama, 340,000 children are overweight and in danger of serious health problems. High blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol were once potentially confined to the aging adult; yet, childhood obesity has broken the barrier, creating an era where these health conditions have been granted access to have early onset. The probability of this gateway health issue trending forward prompts a great need for parental investigation into personalized methods of "child-proofing obesity."

### **CHILDHOOD OBESITY RISK AND REPORT CARD**

In considering individual causes of childhood obesity, it may be worthwhile to take a closer look at what has been deemed childhood obesity indicators. In brief, the following are risk factors outlined by the Mayo Clinic:

- Diet:** Regular eating of high-calorie foods and beverages found in fast food restaurants, vending machines and similar venues easily cause weight gain as they are also often high in sugar and fat.
- Lack of Exercise:** Children who rarely exercise or engage in physical activity are more likely to gain weight and become vulnerable to obesity due to not burning sufficient calories. The wave of over-indulgence in sedentary activities is cited as a contributing factor.
- Family History:** Children who come from a family of overweight people tend to be more likely to put on excess weight, "especially in an environment where high-calorie food is always available and physical activity isn't encouraged."
- Psychological Factors:** Some children's tendencies to overeat stem from coping mechanisms related to emotions or even boredom, and can be learned behaviors exhibited within the household.

▪**Family Factors:** If many groceries purchases are convenience foods, such as cookies, chips and other high-calorie items, this can contribute to child weight gain. Controlling children’s access to high-calorie foods is vital to child weight loss.

▪**Socioeconomic factors:** Statistically, children from low-income backgrounds are at greater risk of becoming obese. Time and resources are cited challenges that can impact making healthy eating and exercise a family priority. While reports have rendered the nation a failing letter grade of “F” for Fat, optimistically a letter grade of “I,” traditionally given for *Incomplete*, may be more befitting to indicate the tremendous need for *Improvement* in attention and efforts regarding youth and obesity.

## **PUTTING THE CHILD GLOVES ON**

For parents, the battle against childhood obesity can be as simple as it can be challenging. Beginning with small daily changes, however, can build the foundation for great life changes. An effective tool for winning the fight on obesity is striking a balance in eating and exercise habits.

▪**Balancing Act I-Sizing it up:** Meals should consciously be chosen that include adequate nutrition and an appropriate number of calories. Consistently regarded as a standard in healthy eating, the USDA Food Guide Pyramid provides daily balanced food selection and portion size. These guidelines can even embody the family favorites by incorporating a few changes, making them healthier and equally satisfying. While calorie-rich temptations can also be enjoyed in moderation, many enjoyable low-fat and low-sugar treats can serve as substitutes. Some easy to prepare examples with 100 or less calories include a medium size apple or banana, a cup of grapes or blueberries or one cup of carrots or broccoli.

▪**Balancing Act II-Making the moves:** An equally important partner in balancing calories is engaging in appropriate amounts of physical activity and avoiding too much sedentary time. In addition to aiding in weight management, physical activity has the benefits of strengthening bones, increasing self-esteem and reducing blood pressure, stress and anxiety and much more. In helping children to remain active, parents should impress physical activity’s quality of being simply fun, and seek to also incorporate it into their own daily routines. Some activities could include brisk walking, playing tag or soccer, jumping rope, swimming and dancing. Hand in hand, being mindful of sedentary time, parents may consider establishing limits on watching television, playing video games, or surfing the web. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advocate that the above measures of encouraging healthy habits in eating and activity are the primary weapons of choice in reducing the rate of weight gain, while allowing normal growth and development. The CDC cautions that children should not be placed on weight reduction diets without the consultation of a health care provider.

## **“INSTILLING” CHILD OBESITY PROOF LOCKS**

There are varied factors in the fight against childhood obesity; however, parents maintain the “home team advantage.” Three bolts in locking out childhood obesity are to look back, look around and look out.

▪**Family health history:** Families should consider a *look back* into their family health history to discover the health issues that may carry a lineage through generations. Helpful information and tools can be accessed at [www.hhs.gov/familyhistory](http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory) that can assist with developing a family history record. Once compiled, it can serve in providing awareness and a guide to proactive health decisions.

▪**Family health present:** It can be helpful for parents to *look around* for small efforts that can be implemented immediately. One example is determining a child's body mass index (BMI) which can be as simple as a click ([www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/)). BMI reveals the amount of body fat and helps establish a point of reference for healthy ranges based upon height and weight. Families also may work to incorporate regular family dinners as well as ensure that children receive an average of 10.5 hours of sleep during weekdays; both are correlated with healthy weight control and wellness.

▪**Family health future:** Parents should *look out* for deeper issues that could be impacting weight gain and over-eating, as underlying problems can continue to fuel weight issues far into the future. Likewise, policing personal efforts is important to ensure support of a healthy body image, and to help avoid replacing one issue with another or adding others to the plate. Remember in implementing changes, you may encounter challenges. Your Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) has agents and resources available to help. In addition to registered dietitians, Extension agents specialize in nutrition/ health, family and child development, financial management among many other areas. The ACES website ([www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)) features an "Ask the Expert" widget along with free publications on topics including healthy behaviors, parenting issues and finance to offer guidance. Free publications may also be obtained from your local Extension office.

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