Childhood Obesity: Who’s to Blame?

Introduction

Childhood obesity is a serious problem our nation is facing. More and more children are developing health complications due to excess weight. The past three decades of research shows that childhood “obesity rates have more than doubled among children 6 to 11 years of age and more than tripled among those 12 to 19 years of age” (Nestle, 2006, p. 2527-2528).

With it being such an issue, who is to blame? Is the media to blame for their marketing tactics? Are some genetically predisposed? Are environmental and sociological factors to blame? Or is the root of the problem the parents?

Childhood obesity is influenced by genetic, physiological, psychological, metabolic, and environmental factors (Black & Young-Hyman, 2006, p.2).

If continued action is not taken, this already serious epidemic could become even more serious.

Purpose

The purpose of this research brief is to inform the reader about the severity of childhood obesity and the influence different sources have on children.

Materials and Methods

This author conducted a literature review on childhood obesity and the different factors that contribute to the epidemic. The articles provided risk factors, statistics and possible causes to childhood obesity. All research was conducted between 2005 and 2007. The author collected the articles on October 22, 2007.

Results

The power of marketing to children

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) conducted a study, analyzing 123 published, peer-reviewed articles finding a link between food marketing and children’s responses. The IOM found there to be a strong correlation between food marketing and children’s preferences, requests, and consumption. (Nestle, 2006, p.2528)

Several companies the IOM contacted did not want to provide facts, because they did not want the information publicized. These companies spend millions of dollars on advertising toward children. Over 600 new children’s food products have been introduced by U.S. companies since 1994, most of these new products being candies, chewing gums and sweet or salty snacks (Nestle, 2006, p.2528).

Recently, marketing to children has become more intense and persuasive. Television is still the main channel of marketing, but now marketers are gearing toward celebrity endorsements, movie characters, toys, educational materials, and more. Children are drawn to their favorite characters, making it difficult for parents to convince their children they do not need to eat sugary food.

In response to the rising obesity rates, people have taken action by suing companies like Kellogg’s and Viacom for promoting junk foods to children (Nestle, 2006, p.2528).
In response to the recent lawsuits, companies are now promoting “healthier” versions of popular foods like PopTarts, fruit snacks and cereals by adding whole grains and real fruit into the foods. Although this may be viewed as a positive change, many of these foods still contain too much sugar and altered ingredients.

Parents role in fighting obesity
A parent educated in a healthy lifestyle can do a lot to prevent the child from becoming another statistic. Vaughn and Waldrop (2007) reported several risk factors that contribute to childhood obesity:
- African-American or Hispanic race
- Maternal obesity
- Low family income
- Lower cognitive stimulation
- Rapid weight gain in the first 4 months of life
- Early adiposity rebound
- Bottle feeding
- Excessive amounts of television watching (p.37-39).

Gray et al. (2007) cited the following behavioral factors associated with childhood obesity
- Television watching
- Computer use/video games
- Fast food consumption
- Decrease walking/cycle for transportation

Environmental factors include:
- Safety concern for outdoor activities
- Availability of food
- Increased advertising
- Reduced exercise in schools and work (p. 549).

Social factors include:
- Family life
- Change in work demands (Gray et al, 2007, p. 549).

Several studies show that breastfeeding decreases the chances of a child becoming obese. Whereas, children that are bottle fed, have a higher risk of obesity (Vaughn & Waldrop, 2007, p.38).

Parents also influence a child’s satiety level. It was found that parents who restricted their child’s diet inhibited their child’s ability to learn self-control.

Vaughn and Waldrop (2007) also encouraged parents to refrain from using food as a reward. When food is used as a reward, it can confuse a child of when it is hungry (p.39).

One of the most significant factors associated with obesity was the amount of television children watched. Studies show the more time in front of the TV, the higher the risk of obesity (Vaughn & Waldrop, 2007, p. 39).

Limited environment and social support systems
Carter et al. (2005) said ethnic and racial minority youth have a higher risk of obesity due to lack of resources and support systems (p. 98).

The Healthy Children Healthy Futures (HCHF) used the media positively by incorporating print, radio spots and posters to encourage healthy eating and physical activity. The HCHF also asked the teens and parents their opinion why it was difficult to maintain a healthy weight. Carter et al. (2005) said teens cited unavailability of healthy foods at home and school, peer influence, and the gross taste of fruits and vegetables as reasons why it is hard for them to stay fit. They also said they lacked the motivation to exercise. Parents stated lack of proper role modeling, lack of nutrition information, and children’s addiction to junk food. Safety was the main issue for not encouraging children to be active.

The results of the HCHF’s program to promote healthy eating and physical
activity showed improvement in the participant’s knowledge of how to incorporate physical activity, television viewing decreased, more fruits and vegetables were added to diets, and perception of portion sizes got better (Carter et al., 2005, p.99).

**Conclusion**

After researching the subject and reading the acquired information, several factors were found to contribute to childhood obesity.

Parents have the most impact on how their child views food and exercise. They should encourage their child to listen to their body and learn to add fruits and vegetables into their diet. Physical activity should also be a part of a daily routine. If parents limit television watching and video game playing and require more outside playing time, their child will be healthier and happier.

The media and marketing techniques also play a significant role in the consumption of “junk food.” The continuous monitoring and strict guidelines put in place to keep companies accountable is helping.

Socioeconomic and environmental factors also influence obesity rates but are not an excuse for the excessive amount of morbidly obese children.

Parents need to take responsibility for the food they provide for their children and be examples of proper health. Without the necessary actions taken, children will continue to get fatter and suffer severe health problems.

**Audience**

A basic knowledge of the necessity of health and nutrition is needed. This research was meant for health practitioners and concerned citizens.

**References**


