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Parents, schools must lead effort to curb child obesity

Thirty years ago, if you lined up 20 American kids to pick teams for a game of kickball, four of them, typically, would have classified as overweight.

Today, gather the same size group and you're likely to find nine children who are overweight.

These statistics do not describe someone else's problem. In Washington County, 23.1 percent of eighth-graders are overweight or at risk of becoming obese.

Weight problems among young people can't be blamed entirely on watching television and playing computer games — although national statistics put those numbers at about five hours per day for most kids.

Diet is a major factor. Young people are addicted to convenience foods high in fat, sugar and sodium.

And, portions of such food are growing. The size of a 7-11 soda drink in 1973: 12 ounces. The size today: 64 ounces.

It is clear that the combination of poor diet and limited physical inactivity is causing this explosion in childhood obesity.

These alarming trends are detailed in a report released two weeks ago by Children First for Oregon, a non-profit promoting statewide public policy on behalf of children.

The group's "2005 County Data Book" focuses on how schools can join the fight to reduce the childhood obesity epidemic.

Many schools already are doing a better job. Around the county, school lunch menus are placing greater emphasis on fruits and vegetables and whole grain breads — and offering students fewer opportunities to select French fries or large servings of dessert at lunch.

Physical fitness class offerings are expanding to include introductions to lifelong wellness activities, such as yoga or aerobics. Vending machines offer more fruit drinks and water — and less soda pop.

But changing diets and encouraging greater physical activity takes time.

School lunch menus can't become all carrot sticks and kiwi. If they did, students, who are consumers who make their own choices, would simply choose to find less healthy meals on their own.

The emphasis for improved good health and diet is not only the burden of schools. To reduce obesity among local youngsters will require the backbone, commitment and participation of family members, community organizations and businesses.

The Children First group offers a road map of success, including emphasizing high-quality health and physical education; increasing ways for students to be active; prohibiting junk-food sales and marketing on school property, and forming health-advisory councils.

Parents can lead this effort by routinely planning evening meals and having a set time for dinner; joining their youngsters in physical activities such as walking, swimming or biking and discouraging a reliance on dining out at fast-food restaurants that don't offer healthy food choices.

Community non-profit organizations and businesses should make wellness a priority by helping to sponsor events and contests that promote good health and offering rewards for those who join in.

Lighten up Forest Grove program, a four-month program that ended a year ago, was a good example of how to run a community wide program aimed at shedding pounds through a healthy diet and exercise. About 300 participants joined teams to maintain a work-out program and log weight loss. The mid-point tally registered more than 300 pounds shed.

For schools, a young person's good health is every bit as important as his or her academic abilities.

For parents, a family's wellness should be given the same importance as long-term financial security. In fact, the two are clearly related.

As the Children First report noted, recent research shows that health-care costs for people who are overweight are almost 40 percent higher than those of others.

We applaud Children First for highlighting this serious, growing problem in Oregon.

As the group's report says, "A public health crisis deserves a forceful and sustained response. To do anything less would simply be ignoring the health and well-being of this generation and generations to come."