

Chapter 1

Looking for Answers

In This Chapter

- ▶ Nailing down the big causes of childhood obesity
- ▶ Changing your family's way of life
- ▶ Working through rough patches

If you've picked up this book and have made it to Chapter 1, we assume that you're interested in the topic of managing childhood obesity either on a personal or professional level. If you have kids or you work with kids (heck, if you see kids), you know that children these days are heavier than ever. Your kids' friends (and your friends' kids) are bigger, heavier, and less healthy than children were even 10 or 15 years ago. What's going on in this world that's causing this kind of weight gain?

Well, nothing's going on throughout the *world*. Childhood obesity (and obesity in general) affects wealthy, industrialized nations. The adult populations in third-world countries aren't worried about the ever-increasing size of their pants, nor are they concerned that their children are becoming too heavy. (In fact, these countries often have the exact reverse situation, wherein they're concerned about their kids having enough to eat.) In the United States, people have become accustomed to eating whatever they want, whenever they want, and eating too much of it. In addition, unlike their forefathers or friends in underdeveloped areas of the world, most Americans don't perform any sort of physical labor as a means of supporting their families. You'd think that would give everyone even more energy to exercise in the downtime, but apparently, everyone's all too interested in what's happening on TV. Sixty percent of adult Americans and 15 percent of American children are overweight. Neither children nor adults are using their stored energy (conserved from a day of sitting behind a desk or in front of the TV filling up on too many calories) to make themselves more fit.



Making oneself healthier usually involves two relatively simple steps:

- ✓ Cutting back on high-fat foods
- ✓ Increasing daily physical activity levels

You may be surprised to hear that although the consequences of childhood obesity are varied and complex, the causes and remedies of the condition are relatively simple. This chapter breaks the topic of childhood obesity down to address two main questions: Where did this problem come from, and what can parents do to help correct a child's weight issue (without making things worse)?

Gauging the Epidemic of Obese Children

With more and more kids getting bigger and bigger these days, doctors and other health professionals have to deal with diverse issues. Obesity isn't a condition that limits itself to weight, with the worst effect being low self-esteem. Childhood obesity can lead to some serious illnesses (like diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease) that can have long-lasting effects. So how bad is the problem of childhood obesity? We get to the bottom of that question in this section.

The widespread nature of childhood obesity

Thirty years ago, less than 5 percent of children were considered obese. Today's figures put the number of obese American children somewhere between 12 percent and 15 percent! That translates into millions of children, preteens, and teens suffering from very adult conditions like diabetes and depression related to weight gain.



Only a physician can make the official diagnosis of obesity. He or she does this by using height and weight charts along with BMI-for-age charts (see Chapter 5). These tools give the doctor a clear indication of

- ✓ How heavy a child is in relation to the normal weight for his or her age
- ✓ The types of interventions the doctor should recommend in order to improve the child's health

Although some areas of the country are touted to have larger populations of heavy adults and kids, childhood obesity isn't really a regional problem. The surgeon general has said that it's an epidemic affecting the entire country; he doesn't single out one specific state or city.

Changes for the worse at home

A large part of the childhood obesity epidemic is the result of some major lifestyle changes. Thirty years ago, back when a tiny percentage of children qualified as obese, there weren't 800 cable television channels to choose from. Video games were boring and low-tech, to say the least, and most people didn't even know what a computer was. Kids simply didn't have endless indoor entertainment options, so they played outside more often. They were active without even knowing it. It's simply what kids did back then!

Today, many kids are glued to some sort of screen much of the time. However, some kids aren't allowed to play outside because they come home from school to an empty house or to a babysitter who isn't quite up to the task of keeping the kids safe outdoors. Thirty years ago, in comparison, a large number of households had at least one parent who stayed home full time, who booted the kids out the door when they got on her nerves, and who prepared meals from scratch. We're not knocking moms who work full time outside the home nowadays. (Indeed, many homes depend on two full-time salaries just to keep things moving toward the black and away from the red.) Families are just far more dependent on fast food and convenience foods these days, both of which tend to be very high in fat, and both of which are believed to contribute mightily to obesity. (Chapter 7 has more detailed information on the drawbacks of the typical fast-food fare.)

With so many meals eaten on-the-go, families don't sit down to dinner together. People have forgotten how to eat for the sake of nutrition; instead, food has become part of entertainment (as when families eat in front of the TV) or a contest to see how fast one can finish an entire bagged meal (because she's running late and only has five minutes for dinner). People don't know what normal portions look like anymore, and they've forgotten how to slow down and evaluate the merits of what they're eating. (For more on family dinners, check out Chapter 11.)

Vending junk at school

In addition to the changes in the average home, many children also face the rigors of making healthy choices at school. In many school cafeterias, finding healthy options is difficult, especially if the school has allowed fast-food vendors to set up shop in the lunchroom. Vending machines have become so commonplace in schools that kids and parents hardly give them a second glance anymore; however, because these machines usually aren't stocked with apples and oranges but instead with soda and candy bars, even kids who want a healthy snack often find themselves out of luck.

What's to Be Done?

You can't fight the system, right? Kids are kids, and they're going to be exposed to ads for junk food and junk-food vendors their entire life. What's a parent to do?

Whether your child has a weight issue or not, you can't throw your hands up in the air and leave his health to fate. The human body — adult or child — is not programmed to subsist on a diet comprised mostly of fat and refined carbohydrates. Cavemen didn't eat French fries. The Pilgrims didn't visit the drive-thru window every evening. Native Americans didn't whip up milkshakes. And guess what? These populations also weren't obese.



Parents of obese children are often tempted to make a concerted effort to improve the child's weight and health, but most kids will try and fail if at least one parent isn't also involved in the regimen.

Easing into activity

Just cutting fat out of your family's diet is a huge step in the right direction. Adding physical activity is another important step. Exercise helps the weight come off faster and also helps keep it off. Plus, exercise has been shown to improve mental states and alleviate depression and anxiety, so it's good for the body *and* the soul.

We're not advocating that you start your heavy child off in some sort of marathon training program. Just get him outside to play. If he's little, play with him. If he's bigger, let him find his own playmates or encourage him to sign up for a sport. Of course, turning off the TV is an essential part of ensuring that your child's activity level increases, so be prepared for an argument — but also be prepared to stand your ground. For more on incorporating physical activity into your family's lifestyle, turn to Chapter 10.

Educating the kids

Your first instinct when faced with an obese child's health crisis may be to take the reins and make his meals, drag him outside for walks, and record his weight every single day. However, the best results in improving a child's health come from a parent leading the way but also allowing the child to make some of his own decisions.

Educating your child without dictating his every move makes him feel empowered to make the right choices when push comes to shove (for example, when he's at a friend's house and surrounded by high-fat treats). If he's been taking care of himself under your watchful eye, he'll be able to take care of himself in the real world, too. Chapter 12 contains ideas for educating your child on making the best choices when he's faced with not-so-healthy options.

Facing Trouble Head-On

If losing weight and keeping it off were easy, everyone would be super-thin. The fact is, making changes to your family's lifestyle takes time. It takes time to institute changes and time for the family to get used to them. It also takes time to start reaping the benefits of healthy living. Because this is a gradual, permanent change, it's not unusual for boredom and frustration to set in. During the adjustment period, you're your child's number one cheerleader. She needs you to remind her of the health benefits of losing weight, so be prepared to be patient with her.

Kids sometimes gain weight when parents think they should be losing. Your child may hit a plateau, when weight gain seems to come to a grinding halt for several weeks. At these times, everyone needs to keep their cool and stick with the new, healthy routines. Setbacks are normal, and despite the frustration, moving forward rather than settling into old habits is still the better way to go. For more on setbacks and remaining supportive, see Chapter 11.

If you suspect that your child would benefit from some sort of professional intervention, such as talking with a therapist or joining a support group for overweight kids, don't hesitate to find her help. Weight is an emotional issue that can leave permanent scars on a person's self-esteem. Improving her physical health is a wonderful goal; just make sure her emotional health is along for the ride. Chapter 14 contains advice on bringing in outside help for your child.

