

## Living well to avoid childhood obesity

You can help your child establish healthy habits from birth. If these habits are established early as part of your family's lifestyle – a natural part of the way you do things – you won't have to impose healthy patterns.

1. Promote healthy eating in your home. Children are more likely to develop healthy eating behaviours when they are given a choice of healthy foods in their home environment. So put healthy foods on your shopping list and prepare nutritional meals and snacks for the whole family. Fewer unhealthy foods (like soft drinks, chips and lollies and snack bars) in your cupboard means you won't have to 'police' what your children eat.

2. As a family, get familiar with the five food groups and the food portions recommended for different age groups to support health and wellbeing. Remember that some categories of food should be enjoyed only occasionally and in small amounts. You could put up a poster that summarises this information in your kitchen or on your fridge. Perhaps you and your child could make the poster together.

3. Make a distinction between 'everyday food' and 'sometimes food'. Everyday food is the healthy stuff. Sometimes food is the not-so-healthy stuff. You might enjoy it but eat it only occasionally. Talk to your child about the difference.

4. Establish healthy eating routines. Healthy eating is not only about food choices. It's also about eating nutritious foods on a regular, predictable basis. For example, it's important to:

- eat breakfast
- eat regular meals and snacks throughout the day
- eat meals together at the table or kitchen bench (rather than in front of the TV)
- allow enough time so that meals can be eaten in a relaxed and unhurried way.

5. Acknowledge children whenever they choose healthy foods. You can do this by giving your child some good positive feedback. For example, 'Wow, you picked a banana for morning tea! Delicious!' Remind your child of the benefits of healthy eating. You can say things like, 'Eating meat helps your heart stay strong so it can pump blood all around your body'. Try to avoid nagging or making eating a battle or power struggle. You're more likely to encourage healthy habits by making mealtimes fun.

6. Make physical activity part of everyday life. Many people think that being active means playing sport or doing strenuous exercise, but that's only one way of being active. For example, you can encourage your child to walk instead of getting in the car, take the dog for a walk instead of watching TV, and use steps instead of lifts or escalators in shopping centres. Remind your child of these options. Take a moment to notice and comment when your child chooses everyday physical activity.

7. Enjoy physical activity as a family. You could try bike rides together or family visits to the park to throw a frisbee or kick a football. Talk about these as fun play rather than exercise. Sometimes children who are forced to exercise or participate in

activities that they don't enjoy develop a negative attitude to physical activity for the rest of their lives.

8. Limit the time your child spends on low-activity pastimes such as television watching, DVDs, computer and other electronic games.

9. Try not to draw too much attention to your child's weight. This can cause low self-esteem and lack of confidence. For example, perhaps you could make a game of weighing your child. Weigh yourself first, and talk about how the scales work.

10. Set a good example. Parents who have a healthy diet and are physically active are much more likely to encourage the same habits in their children. In other words, keep in mind the power of modelling. That is, your child learns mostly from what you do yourself, not from what you tell him to do. Practise what you preach!