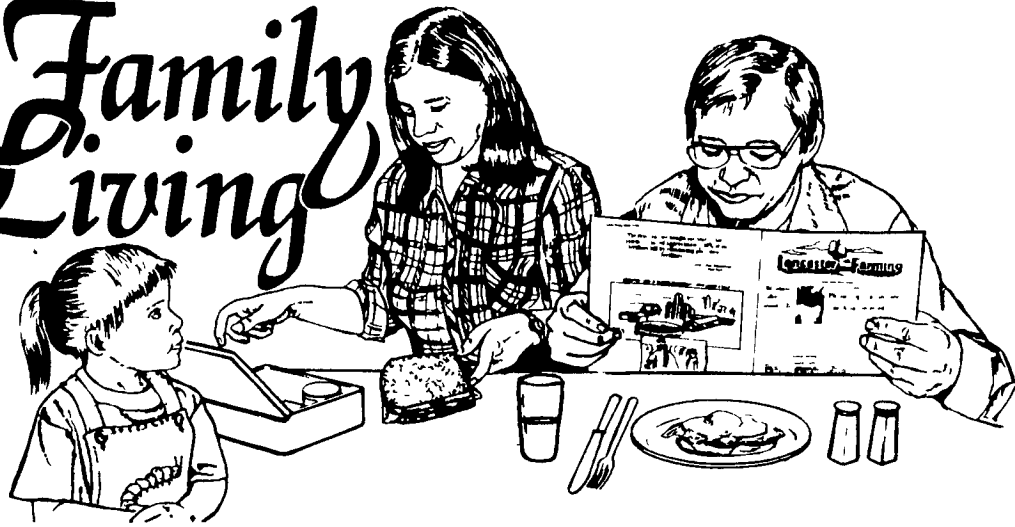


Family Living



Should parents worry over baby fat?

PITTSBURGH — What about "baby fat?" Is it cute and something a child is likely to lose as he/she grows? Or are we promoting a fat adult when we ignore an overweight child?

The answers to these questions are the subject of several research studies. There are some well-founded theories and some evidence that can help put the issue into perspective. Judy Dodd, a registered dietitian with Dairy & Nutrition Council, provides some help for parents concerned about the overweight child.

First, consider that at one time a fat baby or child was considered to be a healthy child. This was the child who could survive the stress of diseases. The belief traces back to the days when diphtheria, typhoid, dysentery, and even common childhood diseases such as measles took their toll of thousands of children. Today we immunize against many of these diseases and still others are under control due to better sanitation. The result is that the effects of childhood illnesses are generally less devastating. Extra calories, stored as fat, are no longer necessary to withstand such illnesses.

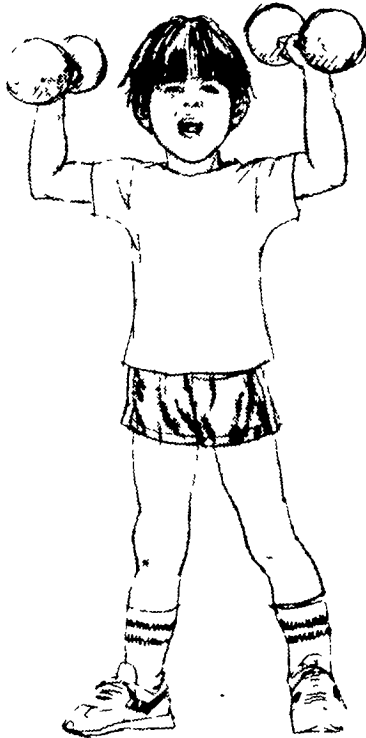
Another consideration is knowing something about children, how they grow, and how to interpret their "size." Weight or height are not the major concerns when evaluating a child. The concern in children, as in adults, is evaluating that child against his or her own growth pattern. Body fat, not just weight should be measured.

Children follow growth patterns established by heredity, stage of development, and environmental factors. Some children will always look heavier and taller than their friends and even their brothers and sisters. It is a higher percentage of body fat than would be normal that signals a problem. And all of these factors are compared to standards for someone of that child's body build and developmental age. It is this type of "overfat" that is the health risk for both children and adults.

Sometimes the tendency to be overweight appears to be a family trait. Bruch notes that a child with one obese (moderate to severe overweight) parent, has a 40 percent chance of becoming an obese adult. When both parents are obese, the risk of obesity increases to 70 percent. The question is how much of this is due to genetics (body build or inborn tendencies) and how much is due to social and environmental factors?

Although it is likely that true "baby fat," the characteristically shapeless body of the young child, will blend into the well-defined body of the adolescent, there are some steps to take while waiting! One of these steps is determining if a child is truly "overfat."

If you have reason to question your child's growth patterns, discuss it with your physician. There are health professionals,



including registered dietitians, who can work with the family and the physician to assess the status of the young child.

Along with the standard weight and height, there are some simple body measurements that will estimate body fat content. These are non-invasive.

Along with these measurements, there should be a professional review of food intake and an activity level assessment. Finally there are series of medical tests that check metabolism and measure hormone levels, should this be necessary.

Prevention

It's never easy to survive in this weight conscious society as an overweight person, but for children and teens, it may be a

crisis situation.

Excessive weight is a health risk. It is a complicating factor in such diseases as high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart diseases. For the child, being overweight in childhood may have as the major health risk an increase in the likelihood of becoming an overweight adult. Add to this the loss of self-esteem and added weight becomes a major health problem!

According to dietitian Judy Dodd, a child who is obese (defined as a condition of being overweight by 15-20 percent more) develops sturdy bones and muscles to support the excess weight. Thus it is possible that as the child becomes an adult, there will be more lean body mass (muscle), and body fat than is found in the average person. People who are obese as children appear to be less successful at weight reduction as adults in part because of the body build developed during childhood.

Research studies indicate that overfeeding in the early years may stimulate the production of fat cells. The result is an abnormally high number of fat cells, each with the ability to grow in size. With weight gain, the cells increase in size as more fat is added; with weight loss, the size of the cells decrease but the number of fat cells remains steady. This higher number of fat cells can complicate weight maintenance throughout life since the cells are there ready to "fill" with fat.

One area which may be controllable is the environmental and social factors which are a part of the tendency to be overweight. Mrs. Dodd points out that one common point of agreement is that the goal should be prevention of obesity or at least control of weight. For the child it means

programming in a weight control oriented lifestyle. Eating patterns, food choices, and exercise are components of this lifestyle. Here are some suggestions:

- Children would be encouraged to develop the sound habit of eating in response to hunger cues rather than responding to social cues. This means that a child should be able to know when to stop eating because he or she is satisfied (full).

- Food is an important part of sociability, but plan events around nutrient dense, low calorie foods rather than feasts! Offer raw vegetable or fruit and a low calorie yogurt dip rather than coldcuts and chips!!

- Start early to build positive food habits. Resist the temptation to use food as a reward for good behavior or to keep children quiet. Often food is used as a pacifier, especially when away from home. Offer non-food rewards for behavior and achievements. Remember, verbal praise and smiles are less expensive rewards that satisfies the need to be recognized!

- At the first indication that a child is truly "full" let him stop, without the struggle that often follows. The tendency to encourage

eating beyond the comfort zone discourages the development of satiety. It encourages children to continue to eat beyond comfort to either gain praise or avoid harrassment. This is the same person who as an adult eats to the point of discomfort!

- Serve child-size portions, not adult size portions. Children can always be offered seconds. In the meantime, it helps children learn to "size up" or visualize portions that are reasonable. Large portions may encourage an unrealistic expectation of portion size and as growth and development slows, large portions continue. Add to this the fact that some children are overwhelmed at very large portions and may choose not to eat!

- Offer variety and introduce new foods, especially those which are lower in calories and nutrient dense. Survival in today's mobile society require a flexible attitude to new foods. And, such options as unusual fruits and vegetables, whole grain and variety grain products, yogurt and low fat dairy products, and the alternate protein products of beans-legumes are healthy food choices. Variety in preparation is also important since stir-fry, mexican and oriental

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BACK HOME

By Michelle S. Rodgers



Berks Extension

Home Economist

Patience by the Bucketful

Warning: If you follow me, you will be in the slowest line! I think that I should probably have a T-shirt with that message written on the back for anyone who steps behind me in a line. I guarantee it will be the slowest one (at least that is what it seems like to me)! A few weeks ago I had a car full of teenagers and was in a line of traffic that took three hours to go three miles. By the third hour, my patience was depleted.

Patience is the name of the game, and one in which I must improve my average. A Co-worker once related to me a visual image of receiving a bucketful of patience each day. Each of us gets a fresh bucketful each morning that must last for the whole day. No one gets more than one bucketful, and none can be saved for the next day. The goal is to use up as little as possible. If you can visualize a bucketful of patience it is easy to understand what someone means when they say, "I've just about run out of patience!"

The biggest problem with this bucket of patience is keeping it intact. Sometimes we have leaks in the bucket. Do you "lose" patience when someone drives slower than the speed limit—in front of you; when your child takes 20 minutes to dress himself; when an elderly person climbs the stairs slowly while you wait to rush by. We each have our own "leak" in our bucketful of patience.

I've also discovered that for some people, summer humidity and loss of patience go hand in hand. Sometimes our leaky bucket is purely our own fault and results from over-scheduling, poor planning, and fatigue.

The next time you find that you are "running out of patience" try a time-out. For example, if you have

become exhausted from referreeing the children, actually call a time-out. Each family member goes to a separate area for the designated period of time. Five minutes is generally long enough to refresh your bucketful of patience. Then get back together and calmly work out the solution together.

Or, if you find you have "lost your patience" while waiting in line at the grocery store, calm yourself by calling a time-out. Instead of muttering and shooting fire at the person ahead with 100 coupons, use the time for your personal benefit. Take several deep breaths, hum a favorite tune, roll your head from side to side to relax your neck muscles, or analyze the fashion trends of the other shoppers. We have to work at patience, because for most of us it does not come naturally.

I've noticed that we seem to lose our patience most often with two types of people: family members and people we don't know at all. That may seem like opposites but is understandable. Close friends and family members know us well and generally accept our behavior as it is. Strangers that we see only once in a lifetime have never seen any other behavior and probably don't care. Isn't it embarrassing to tailgate the slow driver in front of you, only to pass and find out it is your neighbor? Now you worry about the impression you've made. Patience is a gift we can give to family, friends and strangers.

Patience. You can't see it or feel it, but you sure know when you have a lot and when you've run out. It's there to use when you really need it, if you work to stop any leaks. I have been wondering, though, do parents get larger buckets than everyone else, or do they just plug leaks better?

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