



## Children's lives matter

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The question popped up online, from a obviously worried and anxious mother writing on Quora:

“My 12-year-old daughter is obese. How can I make her lose weight?”

It's not an uncommon problem anymore. The incidence of childhood obesity is rising at a shocking speed in South Africa – we are now home to 13% of the world's obese children under the age of five, according to UNICEF.

We are not fully sure about what is causing this rapid increase. “The mechanism of obesity development is not fully understood and it is believed to be a disorder with multiple causes,” according to a paper published in the *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* in 2015. There's been much discussion about food-related possibilities, and there is quite serious evidence that excessive added sugars, especially in the form of soft drinks, is part of the problem.

Not many people understand the other possible forces in our modern environment, for example air pollution. Research showing that nitrogen dioxide could be driving weight gain was published late last year, around about the same time that we were digesting a report showing very high levels of nitrogen dioxide in our own air in parts of South Africa.

Sleep is another possible contributor to obesity. There's a growing body of research indicating that people (adults and children) who don't get enough sleep tend to be heavier than those who do. Just recently, a new study pointed to a link between sleeping with lights (or screens) on and weight gain.

## Take charge

As a parent, you're very right to worry about an overweight or obese child. Some tips that might help:

*Deal with the root cause* if you can. It may be that the weight gain is caused by environmental factors; however, children, like adults, can turn to food for comfort. Is your child being bullied at school? Could he or she be aware of underlying tensions in the home? Has a beloved pet died? Is the child not coping with schoolwork?

*Be the unconditional love you feel.* Don't criticise or nag, but affirm your child and praise whatever aspect of their behaviour you can – helpfulness at home, doing well in a fun quiz, being gentle with the dog, any positive behaviour you can highlight.

*Avoid diets.* A focus on restrictive eating will only set the child up for a lifelong problematic relationship with food – and at a huge cost. Repeated dieting reduces the resting metabolism rate and Dr Kevin Hall and colleagues have worked with Biggest Loser contestants to show how damaging that is. Six years after the show, the metabolism rate was as sluggish as ever, with people needing to eat much less than would be normal simply to maintain their body weight.

The parent's role should be to role-model healthy eating, not to use food as a reward; and to ensure that there is plenty of healthy food in the house (limit processed foods and food with added sugar).

*Get your child moving.* While we know that exercise on its own is not a tool for weight loss (you'd have to exercise for several hours daily to make a dent on energy intake through food), it is a small miracle in many other ways. "Exercise is the wonder drug available to all of us with no side effects," says Professor Witness Mudzi, President of the South African Society of Physiotherapy. "A body that does regular exercise, that moves more, quite simply works better. Exercise helps us maintain stable blood sugars and blood pressure, it improves sleep and boosts mood."

Without linking it to his or her weight, try to find a physical activity your child can enjoy: swimming, dancing (especially funky modern dancing), running, special dad-and-me time while walking the dog, hiking, playing games... Google the rules of rounders, the ancient ancestor of baseball – it can be played just about anywhere and with just about any number of participants, as long as you have a soft ball like a tennis ball and something to use as a bat (people with small children quite like using a tennis racket, which gives the youngest a sporting chance of coming near the ball). Games played as a family or group of friends will get kids involved, shouting and laughing, and keep them active for a few hours.

"Exercise triggers endorphins – the 'feel-good' hormones," explains Professor Mudzi. "This will help the overweight child fight depression. Becoming skilled and proficient at an activity will lift the child's self-esteem." In addition, a favourite physical activity distracts the child from whatever is causing so much pain, and gives them a sense of mastery and power. "Giving your child a sport or movement activity to become passionate about will develop the habit of being active, and that's a gift that will last lifelong," says Prof Mudzi.

If you're not sure about which activity to choose, have a chat to your local physiotherapist, who really understands the moving body. Go to [www.saphysio.co.za](http://www.saphysio.co.za) for more information.