# **Avoid childhood obesity traps... without your kids even noticing you're doing it**

## Last year 9,200 'sumo' babies were born in Britain and one in five are obese by the time they start school - here's how you can help your brood make the best start in life

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Childhood [**obesity**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/obesity) is one of the fastest growing health problems.

Being overweight used to start with middle-aged spread but now an alarming number of [**babies**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/babies) are actually being born ­overweight.

Last year [**9,200 so-called ‘sumo’ babies were born in Britain**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/rise-sumo-baby-more-children-9249075) , weighing 9lb 15oz or more, making them clinically obese. And one in five children are classed as obese by the time they start school.

And being this big so young increases the risk of diseases including diabetes, heart attack, stroke and cancer in later life.

Child obesity campaigner Amanda Frolich, says: “By the time kids reach eight or nine it is too late and thousands of children are already obese – it’s an epidemic so we need to start tackling this earlier, from as young as four months.”

There are many reasons why children today are more likely to be obese than previous generations. A failure to exercise enough and parents not cooking fresh, healthy meals, are two of them, says Amanda who is the children’s fitness expert for the NHS campaign Change4Life and runs pre-school activity sessions entitled Action Amanda.

She has also organised kids’ parties for the Beckhams and Amanda Holden.

She says: “It all boils down to common sense. To help your child ­maintain a healthy weight you need to balance the calories your child consumes with those they use through physical activity and normal growth.

“So you need to encourage them to be healthy and active from an early age.

“If your child is overweight, there are some simple steps you can take to help them get back on track. But remember, the goal is to reduce the rate at which they gain weight while maintaining normal growth and ­development.

“Children and teenagers should not be placed on a weight-reducing diet without advice of a doctor or healthcare provider.

“Your child’s health is more important than anything else you do, including your job, so it is time we started to make it our priority.”

### **Amanda’s tips for helping your children stay healthy & slim:**

**Encourage your kids to be active**

Children are living less active lives – many prefer to stay indoors and watch television or play computer games than go to the park.

A new Ofcom study showed kids as young as three are spending four hours a day in front of a screen.

Children should be doing an hour of exercise each day. But that doesn’t have to be done all in one go – activity can be spread out through a day.

“There are lots of fun ways for children to get the exercise they need without even realising it,” says Amanda.

“Children love kicking and chasing a ball. They also love to be chased.

“My personal favourite is music. As soon as you play music to a child they want to get up and move around to the beat. Turn it into limbo dancing using a broom.

“And you should join in to encourage your children wherever possible.

“The motto is, children dance better when adults dance with them,” she says.

“At the playground challenge them to play on as many pieces of equipment as possible with 30 second bursts of activity on each.

“Walk, scooter or cycle with them to school. Or if you have to drive, park the car ten minutes away from the gates and walk the rest of the way.”

**Cook from fresh**

It may take longer and be more ­expensive, but cooking with fresh ­ingredients is a great way to give your children a good diet. And supermarkets such as Aldi and Lidl make it more ­affordable.

Encouraging children to cook along with you can also teach them habits they will carry into adulthood.

“I used to sit my daughter on the worktop while I was cooking and get her to taste the fresh ingredients before they went into the pan,” says Amanda.

“Get children to hold the food and appreciate the different colours and textures so they are more open to trying healthy foods.

“If you don’t expose your children to these fresh ingredients, they might

become fussy eaters and reject them later on in life.

“Give three healthy choices rather than just one. They are more likely to choose between a carrot, tangerine or a handful of grapes rather than one carrot stick! And reward them if they have eaten their 5 a day!”

Drinking water can help you lose weight by controlling your appetite. Many people, and it’s the same for children, mistake thirst for hunger.

Being dehydrated also makes it harder for your body to break down fat cells.

But don’t let your children drink too much water at mealtimes as it can fill them up and stop them eating their dinner.

It also dilutes digestive juices, making it harder to break down food.

“A child’s body is made up of 75% water, but I find they only drink it when they are thirsty,” says Amanda.

“Teach you children that staying hydrated throughout the day is important for their bodies. Encourage them to take sips regularly, as your body will hold it better than if you gulp it.”

**Square eyes**

Children who spend more than two hours each day watching television or a computer screen are 30% more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, a recent study in the Journal of Cardiology found.

Strictly limit how much time your child spends watching TV or using computers and tablets.

“It’s so easy for a parent to put their children in front of the television while they cook tea, but it’s not helping because they will become addicted,” says Amanda.

“The YouTube phenomenon is a growing problem too. I never go to a supermarket now without seeing a child sitting in their pram staring at an iPad.

“All those websites and apps might seem like an easy and convenient way to entertain and stimulate your child, but it’s a bad idea.”

**Ensure they get enough sleep**

Experts recommend pre-school children get 10 to 14 hours of sleep every night, while primary school kids should aim for at least nine hours.

Many children don’t get enough sleep and are chronically tired, which means their bodies burn less fat and they are likely to consume more calories.

A simple way to address this is to set a strict bedtime – and do not send a child to bed hungry.

“Parents give children too many snacks throughout the day, so when it comes to tea-time they aren’t really hungry and don’t finish their food,” says Amanda.

“By the time they go to bed they are feeling hungry again, so they aren’t getting enough sleep.”

**Make sure they eat breakfast**

This really is the most important meal of the day. It stimulates your metabolism so your body starts burning calories. And it can stop you reaching for unhealthy snacks later in the day.

“Children who aren’t eating breakfast put on weight faster than those children who are, because as soon as the body does eat something at lunch time, it is automatically holding onto those calories because it doesn’t know when it’s going to get fed again,” says Amanda.

“Eggs are full of protein and keep them fuller longer as does oatmeal, so serve porridge with blueberries.”

**Cut the snacks**

“Sweets, fizzy drinks and junk food should be a rare treat, not something children eat every day. A lot of parents say they hide the sweets. But I say don’t even have them in the house,” says Amanda.

But it’s not just crisps and junk food that cause children to pile on the pounds – many supposedly healthy snacks aimed at children are actually high in sugar. “Instead of giving them a nutritious, filling banana I see a lot of parents giving children these supposedly healthy snacks such as cereal bars that are actually high in added sugar,” she says.

“Healthy snacks in the car or on the go can be dried fruit, pre-packed cheese wedges, easy-to-eat raw carrot sticks, grapes and small pots of low-sugar yoghurt.”

**Happy kids are healthier**

Children who are bored, stressed or depressed may eat more to cope with negative emotions.

NHS figures show as many as 4% of children aged five to 16 have an emotional disorder such as anxiety or depression. So take some time to learn the symptoms – such as becoming tearful or ­irritable for no apparent reason – and seek medical advice if you are concerned.

“Eating to cope with stress or depression can become a vicious cycle as children with a weight problem are more likely to be bullied at school, so stop it early,” says Amanda.

**Set a good example**

Toddlers learn by copying other people and in particular their parents, so a good way to stop them becoming overweight is to maintain good habits yourself.

“Often if you see an overweight adult, you see an overweight child too,” says Amanda. “Children don’t get fat by themselves, they only eat what adults give them.

“It’s hard for parents now because they have such busy lives, but being a good role model for your ­children by looking after your own health has to be a priority.

“If a child sees their parents eating junk food, they will too. But if they see their parents going to the gym and eating healthily, they will copy them.

“If your child is already overweight, set a good example by making healthy changes as a whole family.”

**Eat dinner as a family**

“Sitting around the table together is a great opportunity to talk about what you’re eating, how it tastes and why it is healthy,” says Amanda.

Eating at a dinner table also helps remove distractions that stop your ­children eating properly – you can turn off the television and insist they hand over their mobile phones.

You can also keep a closer control of the portion sizes.

“Start with a small serving, then let the child ask for more if they are still hungry,” says Amanda. “Everyone thinks you should eat until you are full, but that’s wrong. You are not supposed to get to that stage.”