Why We Must Put an End to Childhood Obesity

Navid Ashari

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One of the greatest dangers facing the future generations is also one of the most easily preventable. In these past decades, childhood obesity has been slowly infecting more and more children around the world; however, here in the United States, childhood obesity growth has been anything but slow, and the percentage of obese children has more than tripled in the past thirty years. To some, obese children may seem cute and cuddly at first, but what is going on with this rapid transformation our youth is frightening and appalling. The perfect storm of the a immediate gratification that technology provides, mixed with the rise of cheap, unhealthy foods, combined with many other factors, such as genes and high stress levels in our time, has brewed a dangerous kettle filled with cheeseburgers, Dr. Pepper, and french fries. Childhood obesity deserves to be one of our nations top priorities, as it is both extremely widespread, very detrimental to our society, and, most importantly, easily preventable.

Over 9 million children are obese, with almost one in 5 children being obese (APHA 1). Childhood obesity has taken over large pieces of our country, with more than 18% of children in many states, especially in the south and in the east being obese (CDC 1). Another factors that strongly correlate with high rates of childhood obesity, other than geographic factors, is household income, which seems to be inversely, related to childhood obesity rates. Obesity among boys from households with an income at or above 350% the [poverty level](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_level) was 11.9%, while boys with a household income levels at or above 130% of the poverty level was 21.1%. The same trend followed in girls. Girls with a household income at or above 350% of the poverty level has an obesity prevalence of 12.0%, while girls with a household income 130% below the poverty level had a 19.3% prevalence (Ogden 1-8). With the declining American economy, I predict an increase in childhood obesity in the next few years, as more and more households lose income sources and are forced to buy cheaper more unhealthy food.

Many people in this country underestimate the true damage that childhood obesity inflicts on our country. What these people don’t understand is the profound affect being obese as a child, with all that extra weight inhibiting proper bone and body growth, can do to the future of our children. Dr. Ludwig says, "Obesity is such that this generation of children could be the first basically in the history of the United States to live less healthful and shorter lives than their parents.” (qtd. in Belluck 2) Parents who let their kids drift into childhood obesity are cutting priceless years off of the life of the children, and furthermore, raise the risks of heart attack, stroke, kidney failures, amputations, blindness, and ultimately death at younger ages. Even though medicine and technology give us promises of longevity, Dr. Ludwig believes that “the rising prevalence and severity of obesity are capable of offsetting the array of positive influences on longevity" (qtd. in Belluck 4).

Some think that many doctors are sensationalizing the dangers of childhood obesity, but the cold hard facts support the extreme danger of childhood obesity. A decades-long study in Denmark, for instance, tracked what happened to 277,000 children as they grew up, and saw that excess body weight in these obese children dramatically increases their risk of heart disease in adulthood (Hellmich 1). One in three obese children have excess fat in their liver, which could lead to hepatitis, cirrhosis or liver failure (2). As we can see, the truth that obesity in children strongly correlates to dangerous, life threatening problems later in life (including adult obesity, since 30% of all obese adults began their obesity in childhood( Marcus 2)).

In addition to the physical health effects of obesity, there are also mental health effects. Children face social discrimination and low self esteem and so do not enjoy their lives as much as children should. In a recent study by Schwimmer, obese children rated their quality of life with scores as low as those of young cancer patients on chemotherapy (3). Teasing at school, difficulties playing sports, fatigue, sleep apnea and other obesity-related problems severely affected the mental well being of these obese children. These obese children inflict further mental harm on themselves because of the media’s portrayal of beauty: thin, fit girls, and muscular men. These images hover in the children’s mind, constantly throwing a dark shadow over them, telling them that they will never be beautiful in our society, throwing them further into the darkness of childhood obesity.

Other than the physical and mental effects of childhood obesity on the children, there is also, of course, the broad cost to society. Obesity accounts for more than 300,000 deaths a year and the annual cost to society for obesity is estimated at nearly $100 billion (Marcus 1). A 2012 study by Nicole Au in Australia examined the cost of obesity on a society with a strong publically funded healthcare program. After controlling for lurking variable she found that “children who were overweight at age 4–5 on average incurred an additional $93 in non-hospital Medicare costs over 5 years” (673). This study shows that overweight children are a financial burden on society, even before they enter mid-adulthood and start contracting expensive diseases like heart disease, cancer, etc; even their “healthy years” are costly to the people. And then extrapolating these costs over whole populations of children, in the present and in the future, we can see how financially expensive child obesity is for countries with high obesity rates like Australia (and the United States). This huge financial burden placed on the shoulders of the taxpayers shows that effective strategies to prevent and stop childhood obesity would truly lift a gigantic weight off of the people, and would pay huge dividends for future generations.

We now see that as a society we must put an end to childhood obesity, both for the mental and physical impact on the children throughout their lives, and for the financial cost of carrying these obese children on the backs of the American taxpayers. At first the thought of undergoing a large-scale childhood obesity program in the United States may seem daunting, but there have been many success stories. A study in Turkey that examined the effect of 2 different intervention programs on randomly selected groups of children showed that BMI increase was reduced by around 30% in both intervention programs, relative to a control group (Zeliha 5). Studies also show that sufficient exercise in preschool complemented with healthy exercise, such as those implemented by the program “Let Me Play”, have a significant impact on the health of the children (Heather Hein 9).

It should be clear now that eliminating the epidemic of childhood obesity that is ravaging our country should be a matter of the greatest importance. By eliminating obesity in children, we will benefit our society as a whole, saving millions and millions of children from mental and physical ailments, over both the long and short term. Also we will save millions and millions of dollars over the next few decades through cost effective programs. After we finally wipe out the bane that is childhood obesity from the United States, our country, and the world, will be a truly better place.

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