



# First Steps

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## Chubbiness in Children

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry states: “Overweight children are much more likely to become overweight adults unless they adopt and maintain healthier patterns of eating and exercise.” Lately, the problem of chubbiness in children has soared and has become a national health concern. In addition, overweight children are sometimes teased or avoided by their peers and adults. They may also suffer from heart disease, diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, and low self-esteem. Chubbiness usually begins between the ages of 5 and 6 or during adolescence. The most important treatment for obesity is prevention through healthy eating habits.

Source: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, “Obesity in Children and Teens” Jan. 2001

### What Causes Obesity?

- Eating more calories than the body burns
- Some medical or hormonal disorders
- Poor eating habits
- Overeating
- Lack of regular exercise
- Family history of obesity
- Some medications (e.g., steroids)
- Stressful life changes (separations, divorce, moving, abuse, deaths)
- Family and peer problems
- Low self-esteem
- Depression or other emotional problems
- Too much time watching TV, using the computer, playing video games
- Drinking too many high calorie drinks (sodas) instead of water to quench thirst
- Using food as a source of comfort, to overcome boredom, or to ease stress
- Using food as a reward

### What Are the Health Risks?

Generally, health problems increase the more overweight a person becomes. Overweight children have a higher risk of developing serious health problems later in life. These health risks can include:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Asthma
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease (stroke and heart attack)
- Psychological distress from teasing
- Bowel cancer
- Depression
- Isolation

Sources: American Obesity Association and the American Heart Association



Families and schools are the two most important places where children learn the basics for healthy eating. Teaching healthy eating behaviors when children are young is important since change becomes more difficult with age. Pediatrician Stephen Cook, whose main focus is childhood obesity said, “Childhood and adolescent overweight and obesity is a family issue. Children are not isolated. Their eating habits, their physical activity lifestyle, their self-esteem issues are all linked to their family. A child cannot be successful in losing weight without the active support and a lifestyle change in the entire family unit.” (Source: American Obesity Association)

## What is a healthy weight for a child?

It may be difficult to tell if a child still has “baby fat”, or if the child is really overweight for his/her age. At regular physical exams, your doctor will check your child’s height and weight and plot them on a growth chart. A growth chart shows how your child’s growth compares with other children of the same age.

Infants and toddlers naturally have chubby bodies. However, an infant or toddler is considered overweight when his or her weight gain is far out of proportion to his or her growth in height. An overweight baby will look fat, not just chubby.

There may be a weight problem in an older child if there is a drastic change in the growth curve on the chart and the child is much heavier than he or she should be for his or her height and age.

All of these things are best explained by your family doctor or your public health nurse. If you think your child is too heavy for his or her age, get your doctor’s advice before making any big dietary changes.



During growth spurts, children need a proper balance of fat, carbohydrates, and protein, but the size of the portions they eat could be reduced. Generally, diets are not suggested for children. Instead, try to maintain the child’s weight until his or her height catches up with it.

## How can parents help their children stay at a healthy weight?

1. Make healthy eating choices for a well-balanced diet:
  - fresh fruits and vegetables instead of candy and cookies
  - fresh fruit juices or sugar-free alternatives instead of sodas
  - frozen yogurt instead of ice cream
  - bagels instead of donuts
  - low-sugar cereals
2. Make changes in eating habits:
  - set good examples with your own eating habits
  - provide meals and snacks at regular times to
  - prevent “grazing” all day
  - don’t allow children to eat while watching TV or doing homework
  - make mealtimes fun events by eating as a family
  - encourage children to “listen to their tummies” and eat when they are hungry, not out of habit
  - teach children to eat and chew more slowly to enjoy their food
  - do not make outings for fast food part of your daily or weekly habits
  - do not use food as a reward
3. Make changes in physical activity:
  - choose to walk or ride a bicycle and take your kids with you to run errands
  - encourage outside playing instead of inside TV or computer games
  - plan activities that get the whole family moving (hiking, walking, biking, doing yard work, cleaning the garage or house, etc.)

*For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.*