

As a mother of two, I find the increasing incidence of childhood and youth obesity concerning. I am also concerned by many of the factors which I believe are contributing to this problem. I welcome this inquiry and thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

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In my experience as a mother, and as a member of some parenting organisations, I can see a number of reasons why children are more likely to be obese now than in previous generations. These include a low rate of breastfeeding, insufficient and inaccurate information about nutrition (in particular for infants and toddlers), misleading and opportunistic advertising of foods with high fat and/or sugar contents and unclear or misleading nutritional information on food packaging. Sadly, these issues are not giving children the best start for a healthy body weight and this problem continues into youth and adulthood. One of the first steps towards combating the obesity problem must be to address these issues which are impacting on the very young and setting them up for lifelong weight problems.

Several studies have shown that breastfed infants are less likely to be obese as children. One study of over 15,000 infants in the USA showed that infants receiving any breast milk at all were 22% less likely to be overweight in later life, and those breastfed for longer had an even lower rate (Gillman, et al. 2001). Similar results were reported in a study in Germany which found that infants who were breastfed for up to 6 months were 20% less likely to be overweight and 25% less likely to be obese, and those breastfed for over 6 months were 35% less likely to be overweight and 43% less likely to be obese (von Kries, et al. 1999).

It therefore makes sense that in a society with a low rate of breastfeeding, particularly beyond 6 months, obesity is a problem. Given that this is just one of many health issues which breastfeeding can reduce, it is amazing that more isn't already being done to increase the alarmingly low rates of breastfeeding in this country. Every day women who want to breastfeed are switching to formula as they are not receiving the information and support they need to continue, they are unaware of the full implications of this decision and they believe the well-established breastfeeding myths such as that low milk supply or quality is common. In many cases the bad advice is even coming from medical professionals! By offering more support to breastfeeding women, increasing the visibility and accessibility of the Australian Breastfeeding Association and Lactation Consultants, providing more education and information to medical and allied health professionals and the community in general, amongst other initiatives, a significant step forward would be taken towards the fight against weight problems.

Furthermore, more education is needed for parents in the area of paediatric nutrition. Most parents introduce fruit juice to their infants, believing it to be a healthy option. Fruit juice, even watered down, is high in sugar and not necessary or desirable in an infant's diet. Also, I know of many parents who buy the "baby" or "child" version of foods such as cheese and yoghurt, without being aware that in many cases they are actually higher in sugar than the adult versions. These are just two examples to illustrate that many parents do not know that many of the food and drink options that they choose for their children with good intentions, are not in fact good choices. The source of information about nutrition for children is primarily the food manufacturers, which is hardly an objective source. A highly visible, objective campaign to educate parents about the true nutritional benefit of children's foods, including age-appropriate healthy eating plans, would be a very worthwhile initiative. This should also be complemented by a review of information disseminated by food manufacturers, including brochures, food labelling and "informational" websites.

As well as an education campaign, more also needs to be done to ensure that the nutritional content of foods is visible, accurate and easy to understand, and that the marketing of foods, particularly aimed at children, is not misleading. Every day I can turn on a TV and see an ad which portrays a high sugar and/or high salt product, (such as most breakfast cereals), as a healthy food which will promote my child's growth and well being. Every time I grocery shop, I can find a high sugar product with a "no added sugar" label on it and the sugar content mentioned by a name which might not be recognised as sugar by many consumers. Every day Australians are eating, and feeding their children, foods which are contributing to weight problems and other health issues, and believing them to be healthy choices. Stricter guidelines and harsher penalties are required to prevent this, and to take a positive step forward to improve the health and weight of our citizens.

The problem of obesity in Australia can be stemmed. The first step is to tackle it at the entry point. By ensuring that more infants are breastfed, and for longer, our youngest generation are getting the best

possible start. Then by educating parents about nutrition and healthy eating, children (and their parents as a flow on effect) will be given a much better chance of maintaining an ideal weight. These healthy eating patterns will be likely to continue into their youth and adulthood and the cycle of obesity will be halted. Something can, and must, be done. And it shouldn't be that difficult to work out where to start.

**References:**

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