Editor’s Letter-Spring 2010

Obesity: Have You Checked the Children?

March 4, 2010 By Kate Ferguson

Last summer, police in South Carolina arrested a mother for neglecting the health of her 555-pound, 14-year-old son. The case made national news—and raised controversial issues.

Should parents be held legally accountable for a dangerously overweight child? And, in general, when are parents to blame for their children’s wellness? If youngsters become sick or unhealthy while in their parents care, does this constitute child abuse or neglect?

The issue has been discussed before. Courts in several states have weighed the matter. All except one ruled to include “morbid obesity”—weight gain that harms the body’s organs and leads to life-threatening illnesses—in their legal definition of “medical neglect.”

This kind of abuse is classified as maltreatment. When a parent or guardian denies a child necessary health care, he or she may be arrested and charged with this type of neglect.

In the South Carolina case, police did charge the mother with criminal neglect. In response, her lawyer claimed she was unable to control her son’s diet when she was at work and could not supervise him. And she stated that when she was at home, she fed him the proper foods—she even followed guidelines given to her by the state’s Department of Social Services. (At press time, the court had not set a hearing date for this case.)

As is often the case, however, parents who are not present can’t police their children’s behavior. (Sometimes the adults can’t do it even when they are there.) What’s a parent to do?

Obesity involves many factors, and just monitoring a child’s diet cannot guarantee that little Tommy or Tisha won’t tip the scales at some future date.

In fact, a growing number of American parents are seeing their children become statistics.

According to reports about obesity trends, children are not merely obese, they are severely obese. The health risks for this group are staggering, and more studies are looking at the fat connection between parents and their children.

Unfortunately, the problem transcends geographic boundaries. In Britain, one study placed the lion’s share of blame on overweight parents for their offspring’s hefty problems. Researchers found that heavy parents tended to overfeed their kids. The study concluded by recommending that parents practice portion control at children’s mealtimes.

In reports about the South Carolina case, nowhere do I recall journalists mentioning how much food the teen ate.

Although it affects weight gain, portion control is an often overlooked aspect of the obesity problem. Most obesity studies focus on the condition’s link to an unhealthy diet and physical inactivity. This British study, however, indicated that those factors appeared to have little influence on the weight carried by 4- to 12-year-olds.

The study also suggested that children of overweight parents are often also fat because kids are likely to mirror their parents’ behavior. Specifically, girls copy their mothers, and boys imitate their fathers.

Have you checked what’s on your child’s plate? How about that serving size? And, while you’re at it, watch what you dish up for yourself. Why? Because your eating habits can serve as a critical influence on your children’s ability to make healthier choices now and later.

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