

Will You Outlive Your Child?

Add Years to Your Child's Life

It's a frightening fact for me to accept that **for the first time in history, this generation of children may die five years younger than their parents** because of poor eating habits and lack of physical activity that could drive life-threatening illnesses. As a parent, I am

terrified to realize that if this situation doesn't improve soon, this generation of children, through no fault of their own, will experience shorter life expectancy than their parents because of illnesses like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. This situation holds true for all developed economies, and therefore, we are not exempt in Bermuda. When I look at my children and the children in my community – I am truly frightened and realize I must take action!

What's the Bermuda situation... how do we compare?

Research shows that developed economies like the United States have reduced physical activity levels by as much as 32% in fewer than two generations, as reported in Nike's 2012 Designed to Move Report. We don't have such physical activity data in Bermuda. We do, however, have some statistics related to obesity which is a condition that has been linked to both poor eating and poor physical activity habits.

The 2004 US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) found that 14% of 2-5 year olds and 19% of 6-11 year olds were overweight or obese. The 2006 Bermuda Department of Health Survey of Adults and Children (aged 0-10 years) found that 21% of 3-4 year olds were obese, and 36% of 5-10 year olds were overweight or obese, indicating a considerably worse situation locally with respect to this issue of global concern. In addition, 44% of children watched

more than one hour of TV per day, and this increased with age, with 18% watching two or more hours, and these tended to be aged 5-10 years (25%).

The Department of Health Teen Survey of 2001 showed that only 29% of Bermuda teens (i.e. middle and high school students) got five or more days of physical activity each week, while (27%) reported getting little or no daily physical activity. The average participation in PE classes was 1.9 days per week. At that time, some 13 years ago, 25% of teens were found to be overweight (based on BMI) and 52% had excessive body fat (percent body fat greater than recommended). In terms of dietary habits, 57% of teens ate less than five servings of fruits and vegetables daily, while 82% ate less than six servings of bread or cereal daily. Notably, 25% of the teens surveyed ate three or more servings of fats and or fried foods daily, while 21% ate fast foods three or more times per week, while 31% skipped breakfast regularly. These statistics are dated, and it is likely that our situation has deteriorated.

How did we get here?

Thirty years ago, we led more active lives that helped keep us at a healthy weight. Children generally walked to school everyday, ran around at recess and lunch, and played for hours after school. Meals were home-cooked, portion sizes were more reasonable, and vegetables were a part of every meal.

Children today experience a very different lifestyle. Walking to school





has been replaced with being driven to school in the family car or on the bus. Gym classes have been greatly reduced and replaced with academic classes. Free play at recess, lunch and after school have been replaced with more sedentary activities and entertainment media including TV, computers, video games, movies and cell phones. Whether at home, school or being transported from place to place, vehicles, machines and technology now do most of the moving for them. On top of the lack of activity, with both parents working in most families, family life is hectic, with fewer home cooked meals, and more snacking in between meals as we dart from place to place.



Let's make a CHANGE!

As serious as this situation is, the good news is that we can help our children lead healthier lives by making just a few lifestyle changes. We already have the tools we need to do it, we just need the will! The first ten years of life are a key developmental phase and are a critical window for building a foundation of healthy habits. We must break this cycle of physical inactivity. As parents, we must ensure that our children have positive experiences in physical play, physical education, and sports. We must find ways to integrate physical activity back into our daily lives, and we must be active ourselves, so that we can model the behaviors we wish to see.

Helping our children to develop healthy eating habits early in life can last a lifetime. Children learn from the meals we offer, the way we serve food, and the examples we set. For example, we can make silly faces out of fresh fruit and vegetable slices, involve kids in preparing healthy meals and snacks like trail mix together, and use plates that encourage reasonable portion sizes.

As parents, we must commit to making these lifestyle changes for our children - their life depends on it. Let's commit to give them their five years back!

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