

Episode 017: For Parents: Countering Childhood Obesity

Hey what's up guys! Coach T. coming back at you for another episode, and yes, I'm rockin' the stand-up desk! I love my wife; this is a great Christmas gift.

So, here we are still at the beginning of the year and one of the things that struck me early on this year—really not just recently, but I've wanted to do this topic for quite some time—is this notion that many of the problems that we face with health as adults actually starts so much earlier than adulthood. So today I want to dedicate this episode to many of you who are near and dear to my heart because you are parents.

You know, we have an awesome obligation to raise, to care for, to look out for, to educate, and to provide for our children, and that's something that we take very seriously in this household. It's one of the things that we want to impart upon our children who are now 5 and 2, and that's the importance of healthy living from nutrition to fitness to just good choices all around.

Specifically, the question that I am addressing today is how to counter childhood obesity. This is important, like I said, because childhood obesity has a high chance of becoming obesity in adulthood, and that brings with it a whole host of health problems and issues that we'll get into in a little bit here.

Before I do that though, the freebie for this episode is one from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service Department, it's a PDF that I was able to get entitled “Helping Kids Learn to Make Healthy Food Choices in Five Easy Steps.” I wanted to provide something that was easy to understand, easy to implement—Lord knows that's what we need as parents, right—and realistic when it comes to the challenges that we face as parents.

So, let me go through a couple of facts before we get started. Regarding childhood obesity, about one in three American kids and teens is overweight or obese. Next, the prevalence of obesity in children more than tripled from 1971 to 2011 and went from about 4-6% to 12-18% depending on the age group that you're talking about. But childhood obesity is now the number one health concern among parents in the United States—it tops drug abuse, it tops smoking. Childhood obesity is that important, and it needs to be. So, what's the so what behind all this though?

Well, among children today, obesity is causing a broad range of health problems that previously weren't seen until adulthood. I'm talking things like high blood pressure *in kids*, type-2 diabetes *in kids*, elevated blood cholesterol levels *in children*, and excess weight is associated with an earlier risk of obesity related disease and death in adulthood. There are also psychological effects the data shows. Obese children are more prone to low self-esteem, to negative body

image, and depression. All of these things are stacked against them, so we need to increase the odds—to put things in their favor.

So, what you probably may know but maybe need to hear again: there are a few things that I'll go through here first, it's that the habits that are formed at a very early age—and those preferences that are developed—they set the normalcy for the child. And I can't help but think of the FitLife program here, because that's the theme throughout the FitLife program: it's that the habits that you practice on a regular basis are going to determine your normal. If you will sow those habits that you set for your children, those are going to carry through to adulthood.

But, it actually starts before that! It starts in the womb. Many of you know that my wife and I focused on that part of our life in the pre and postnatal services that we provide through TD Fitness. That's how important this is to us, because pre and postnatal training being one of the core offerings that we provide, we understand that it is so important for the expectant mother to have healthy habits that will carry through—not just through the pregnancy, but that actually sets the stage for how healthy the child is going to be after birth. That's one of the things that that we absolutely like to focus on and that we're passionate about, because we understand how important it is.

So, what is it that we can do as parents? Well, I'll start with infancy, and the first thing I'll mention is breastfeeding up to 12 months if you can. That's what's recommended. Breast milk provides ideal nutrition and it's sufficient to support optimal growth and development for about the first four to six months after birth. Now, I will say, okay...here I am, a male person or trainer and health coach talking about breastfeeding. I completely understand and empathize with the mothers who do this and attempt to do this. I'm not saying that it's easy. I know it! There are good days and bad days. I've seen it in our family. But I'm just giving you the facts: that breastfeeding and breast milk is absolutely something that is beneficial to infants.

Next, delay introducing 100% juice until at least six months of age, and even then you want to limit it to no more than four to six ounces a day. You know I still remember the first time our oldest daughter had juice. She was over two years old and we had gone to the apple orchard and it was a great day. We were letting her pick some apples as best she could, you know at age two, and they had hay rides there and they had a bunch of activities for the kids. But they also had some fresh apple cider and they made these apple cider smoothies, and my wife and I got a smoothie. It was delicious. We decided to give some of it to our daughter and put it in her little sippy cup, and I'll never forget because we filled the sippy cup up and when she started drinking that, her lips literally did not leave the sippy cup until the smoothie—the slushie—was gone. It was that good to her. Of course it was! It was delicious to us too! But, the point is that there's natural sugar in that, and there might have been some added sugar in that too, but sugar

is one of the things that not only appeals to kids, but it appeals to adults. It's metabolic; it's not just a craving that some people have. Sugar causes those types of responses. So you want to limit the 100% fruit juice and those sugary drinks early on because again the habits that you set early on are going to carry through to adulthood.

Next, don't over feed infants and young children. They can actually self-regulate the amount of calories they need each day so children shouldn't be forced to finish meals if they aren't hungry. Man, I really wish my parents were around to hear this one, because I remember sitting at the table for hours while they told me that I needed to finish my food. Well, finish my vegetables, and I have to admit I've done this with our oldest daughter too, and a little bit with our youngest. So it's good that I am learning some of these things through my research and researching for these episodes that I that I present to you guys. But one of the things we try to do here is stick to normal routines and patterns. So, will typically give the same amount of food each day: each morning, around lunchtime, and then for dinner. But kids often vary their caloric intake from meal to meal. Just a couple of days ago our daughter had three plates for dinner and she hardly ever does that, and then some days they will barely touch their dinner and it's again because kids will vary their caloric intake from meal to meal. So don't get upset that they're not eating unless it goes for an extended period of time—like over a course of days. If they are hungry and they ask for more, then give it to them. You know, maybe they're going through a growth spurt or something like that. But a lot of times, it's easy for us to get wrapped up into the “normal patterns.” Patterns are good, specifically in raising children, but just understand that meals and the amount of intake may vary from day to day.

Next, you want to increase healthy foods and keep offering them even if they're initially refused. I see so many parents make the mistake of trying to give their kids something healthy and when the kid turns it down they never try again. You know, they think that they're their child does not like “corn,” for example. We put corn in front of our youngest daughter off and on for months and she finally started eating some just this week! So big win here in this household! But keep trying to put those healthy foods in front of them. Introduce those healthy foods. Like I said, keep offering them and you'll see that maybe they'll accept them at some point, and if it's not that particular food then maybe they'll accept some other foods. But, what you don't want to do is introduce foods without any nutritional value just to provide calories. Empty calories are not necessarily better than no calories at all.

Okay, a few more facts. You know in the diets of children under age 8, breakfast cereals rank only behind candy, cookies, ice cream, and sugary drinks as a source of dietary sugar? So know what you're feeding your kids. Look at the nutrition labels. I know it's tough. Mornings are busy, there's a lot of kids right? You've got to get everyone out of the house to school, got to go to work, so you need something easy—typically something quick that you can give to the kids for

breakfast. Well, maybe you could try boiled eggs instead of breakfast cereal? I'll tell you that most days though, our five-year-old eats cereal. We try to give her the healthy varieties of cereal, but most of the time she's still eating cereal. Our two-year-old on the other hand, eats oatmeal that we cook every single day. I'm not talking about instant oatmeal. I'm talking about the actual boil water on the stove, pour in the oats, and then mix it up until the oatmeal is cooked. We do that every single day. I add a little honey to it to sweeten it and I'll crush half a banana and give her that oatmeal for breakfast and our two-year-old loves it! She loves it just like her sister did for the first three years of her life. Poor girl ate oatmeal for almost three years straight every single morning... But, those are some of the things that can help with a healthy environment at home.

Now, when it comes to making changes and changing weight, the healthiest way to change weight is gradually. You've probably heard this before because it's no different than what we do as adults. That's why the recommendations that focus on small but permanent changes in eating and physical activity may work better than a series of short-term changes that can't be sustained very easily. Again this feels like I'm in another "Fit Life" program lesson because this fact, "the small changes over a period of time," it's the same methodology that we teach in the "Fit Life" program. The importance of continuing those lifestyle changes should be emphasized to the entire family, it's not a kid thing and it's not an adult thing, it's for the entire family, because these are healthy practices that can carry you throughout.

Now, I said earlier that childhood obesity is shown to lead to a number of diseases later in life and one of those is cardiovascular disease. The American Heart Association has dietary recommendations for infants, for children, and adolescents to promote cardiovascular health. So I'm going to give you a couple of things that they recommend.

The American Heart Association recommends first to encourage healthy eating habits. Small changes can lead to a recipe for success. We've already talked about that. Next, like I said, same thing for adults, you want to provide plenty of vegetables, plenty of fruits, and whole grain products instead of refined or simple carbs. Serve a variety of fruits and vegetables daily while limiting the juice intake. Each meal should contain at least one fruit or vegetable. I think that's a good practice and it's a good habit to get into particularly for our kids. Low-fat dairy, lean meats, poultry, fish, lentils, beans, all of these are good protein sources and try to introduce and regularly serve fish as an entrée. Just last night we had sushi with our five-year-old. I'm so excited that she eats sushi! But, you want to avoid the commercially fried fish, right? Avoid those overly fatty foods with a lot of saturated fats. Encourage your family to drink lots of water, and limit the sugar-sweetened beverages and sugar in general. Also, limit sodium and saturated fats.

You know, some advice that we got early on as parents, “when they're very young you choose what they eat, but let them choose how much.” Right? As a toddler, maybe give them a choice between healthy options: “would you like corn or broccoli with your dinner?” and remember, don't overfeed them! Estimated calories that are needed by children range from about 900 calories a day for a one-year-old, to about 1800 calories for a 14 to 18 year-old girl and 2200 calories for a 14 to 18 year-old boy. Those adolescent boys are burning some calories! Particularly when you consider that when you look at most nutrition labels they say the serving sizes are based on a 2,000 calorie diet, so adolescent boys 2200 calories per day.

Next, you want to choose a variety of foods that get enough carbohydrates, enough proteins, enough of the fats and other nutrients, enough water, enough vitamins and minerals. And I'll say it again; the normal that they know is the one that you are going to create. So start it young! You can make some of their favorite dishes healthier by adding chopped veggies. One of the things that we do here is we use veggie pasta a lot. So we don't have to put a lot of veggies on their plate. Although we do that as well, but the pasta itself has vegetables in it, it's cooked in. Smoothies are also a huge hit in this household! We invested in a good smoothie maker and our kids have smoothies just about every day. Their favorite one is whatever kind of fruit we have in the house, but typically we start with a milk base, add a banana, add some berries—whether it's raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, or blackberries—we'll add a handful of kale, some Greek yogurt, maybe a little bit of honey, but typically you don't even need that because all the fruits are sweetened with natural sugars. They have fructose and the milk has lactose in it, those are sugars, so the smoothie will be sweet already. You don't typically need to add any kind of sweetener to it.

You also want to try to remove those calorie rich temptations. Keep those things out of sight and out of mind. Give them access to healthy options. I'll be honest, I just put this under the category of parenting, because I think it's common sense. You want to remove the calorie rich options and replace them with healthy options. That's just what we have to do.

We got a lot of good tips and advice from this free online course we took a couple of years ago. It was called “Child Nutrition and Cooking” and it was by Dr. Maya Adam of Stanford University. I'm going to link to that in the show notes! It was maybe ten lessons and she showed how to make some meals. She provided a lot! I believe she's a registered dietitian and a professor there at Stanford. There's a lot of good information in that course so I'm going to share that with you all because I think it'll be beneficial.

So, when it comes to other things that you can do, you can help your kids stay active! Teach them the benefits of activity. Children and teens should participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week, and every day if possible. You can set a great example

yourself. Start adding some physical activity into your own daily routine and encourage your child to join you. You know, more than what you say, your children are going to emulate what you do. So it's that important that you set the stage and provide that positive example so that they can follow it. Also, reduce their sedentary time—the time sitting. You know, quiet time for reading and homework, that's fine, right? But, you want to limit the screen time, the TV, the video games, the internet. Limit it to no more than two hours a day, that is what is recommended. The American Academy of Pediatrics doesn't recommend TV at all for kids who are under 2 or younger. So encourage your child to find some fun activities to do with family members or on their own that simply involves more activity.

Now, you know that obese kids can lead to obese adults. What you may not know is that those who are obese in childhood have over 17 times the risk of obesity going into adulthood. All right? Over 17 times the risk of obesity going into adulthood, and childhood obesity is a predictor of increased mortality in adulthood. But here's the catch! It's a reversible risk factor! Meaning, that overweight children who reach normal weights as adults, have the same mortality risk—that lower mortality risk—as those who have never been overweight. So we can reverse this, all right? That's the good news!

Now, I'm going get scientific on you for just a second, but I'm going to try to break this down. Understand that there are two types of obesity: one is called “hypertrophy” and one is called “hyperplasia.” Hypertrophy is a term that you may have heard before because when you talk about adding muscle mass or adding size you talk about muscle hypertrophy. It's an increase in size, specifically through the growth in size of the component cells. So when it comes to obesity, that's when your existing fat cells enlarge or fill with fat. Now, this is the type of obesity that occurs later in life after you've stopped growing, and your development is stopped, and you're not developing as you were as a youth. Again, it's associated with an enlargement of the existing fat cells, but you still have a normal number of fat cells, it's just that they're bigger. That pattern—that hypertrophy pattern—is correlated with truncal fat distribution, or what we call the apple shape when kind of classifying the different body types. There are health consequences later in life when it comes to that. Men on average gain between a half pound and 1.8 pounds of fat each year until their 60s despite a gradual decrease in food consumption, and approximately 14% of women gained more than 30 pounds between the ages of 25 and 34, so women in general have more fat cells than men. Okay, so that's hypertrophy. The cell size is going to increase, those fat cells are going to enlarge or fill.

Then you have hyperplasia. Hyperplasia is when the total number of fat cells increase and that's the obesity that occurs early in life, sometimes before the age of one, and then other times early in life during the growth spurt between the ages of 9 and 13. Okay? So that causes an increase in the number of fat cells and I bring this up specifically in the discussion of childhood obesity

because this type of obesity, the hyperplasia, that can easily predispose a child to being obese throughout adulthood. Children who are overweight or obese between the ages of 6 and 9 have a 55% chance of becoming obese adults. That's 10 times the risk of children of normal weight, and if that's not scary enough, this is even scarier once that pattern is established. Once the number of fat cells increases, it remains constant for your entire life! In spite of whether or not you lose or gain weight, all right? It's not impossible, but reducing body fatness is especially difficult for those with a high number of fat cells and unfortunately for those individuals there's no amount of dietary restriction or exercise that can reduce the number of fat cells... Therefore, lifestyle modification plans that strive to reduce the overall body fat is only going to reduce the amount of fat in each existing cell, which means that it's going to be more difficult to reduce your body fat percentage and to maintain that fat loss.

The reason I bring that up is because childhood obesity, when you gain weight or become obese as a child, increases the number of fat cells you have and that number of fat cells is not going to decrease. It's going to be with you for the rest of your life. You're always going to have a harder time losing weight and maintaining lower weights, because you have more fat cells. Okay?

So the takeaway from all of this is that being obese as a child not only increases the chances of being obese as an adult, by a lot by the way, but it also makes the road to healthy living difficult to travel and very difficult to maintain. We cannot do this to our children. You know, another saying I've heard: "you're not raising your children, you're raising your grandchildren's parents." So let's not start that cycle, or let's not continue that cycle of unhealthy generations. The good news again it's that those who gain weight as a child and subsequently lose it have the same lowered risk factors for disease as those who were never overweight to begin with! So it's reversible, all right?

Before I sign off, I'm going to leave you with a quote. This one's from a book that I read recently called "*The Obesity Code*" by Dr. Jason Fung, and what it says is:

"What has really hampered our ability to combat childhood obesity is a simple lack of understanding about the true causes of weight gain. A singular misguided focus on reducing caloric intake and increasing exercise led to government programs that have almost no chances of success. We didn't lack the resources or willpower, we lacked knowledge of and a framework for understanding obesity."

So that's a teaser for you that I'm going to get into in another episode where I talk about the true causes of weight gain and why we have such a hard time losing weight. I talked about this topic this week in the "Fit Life" program so I know that they get it, but I'm going to put it out as an episode at a later date. I'm going to leave you with another quote here and this one's sobering, it's from a

former Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona. When he spoke about the childhood obesity problem he put it this way, he said: “because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.”

That is sobering. It's up to us, guys! As parents, we have an obligation to care for our children in every way. It's a privilege that not everyone is blessed with, so let's not waste our chance, all right? Before I sign off I want to remind you about the freebie I have for you called “Helping Kids Learn to Make Healthy Food Choices in Five Easy Steps.”

If you're watching this on Facebook or social media I'll make that available right now as soon as I close off this session here. I'll put it in the comments section, and if you're catching this as a podcast at a later date you can always grab that freebie on the show notes page for this episode.

In case you don't want to do either of those the direct link to the freebie is tdfitness.net/017download. As always, thank you guys so much for tuning in! Until the next time, you guys have a blessed one!

Coach T. out!