

GrowFit Media

The Health and Wellbeing of Australian Children

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For several years now health experts have been warning us about the growing number of Australians who are overweight or obese and of particular concern to them is the increasing prevalence of overweight children. Stories on childhood obesity, its causes and many related problems, are appearing in our newspapers almost weekly and a quick search of the Internet reveals this to be a problem that is occurring in many countries around the world.

Elizabeth Waters of the Royal Children's Hospital in Victoria wrote, in a 2003 article titled- Childhood Obesity: Modernity's Scourge, "The health and wellbeing of Australia's children, now and in the future, is under threat". Since 1995, when an official survey found that 23% of Australian children were overweight (6% of these obese), it is estimated that the prevalence of overweight children has doubled, while the prevalence of obese children has more than tripled.

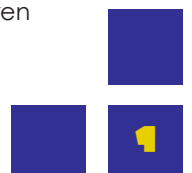
It is generally agreed that childhood obesity is inextricably linked to a range of medical conditions like type 2 diabetes, hypertension and asthma. Compounding this dilemma are the associated issues of social acceptance, athletic competence and physical appearance, which often lead to emotional and behavioural problems and low self-esteem.

The implications for the future seem grim. Considering that most of these children will continue to be obese into their adult years, what will happen in 10 or 20 years time when the associated problems of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes become endemic? The costs and pressures on the public health system will be significant.

To again quote Elizabeth Waters - "The overarching cause of the obesity epidemic is energy imbalance – a relative increase in energy intake (food intake) together with a decrease in energy expenditure (decreased physical activity and increased sedentary behaviour)." Apart from the diverse and complex issues, both cultural (environmental) and chemical (genetic), that set the background for childhood obesity "some simple trends suggest relatively amenable remedies. Children's fruit and vegetable consumption has decreased over the past 20 years. Their physical activity time has also decreased, while time spent in sedentary activities such as television watching and computer games has increased. Finally, consumption of energy-dense foods (including sweet soft-drinks and snack bars with high sugar content) has increased."

This problem needs to be tackled on many levels – most importantly through informing and educating parents but also through access to community support groups and Government policies that help to create a healthier environment for children. One potential area where we might beneficially influence children before they start to develop weight problems is through television. Although recent research has shown that excessive television viewing by children is directly related to obesity levels, health experts believe this may be more to do with their exposure to so many commercials (especially for junk-food) than it does with sedentary behaviour and this has been confirmed in several American studies.

As a possible medium for affecting the attitude and behaviour of children in regard to healthy eating and physical activity, television has two main advantages – firstly, it can reach a very large number of younger children before school life and friends begin to influence their character and secondly, by its very nature, it can reach such a high proportion of children who risk developing weight problems (being those that watch the most TV and have the least parental supervision).



Many social and environmental factors are leading to this energy imbalance in children today. Top of the list has to be the abundance of snack food and junk food marketed to children, while other factors involve the fears and anxiety many parents experience in regard to their children's safety - leading to a restricted access to outdoor space without adult supervision.

Government has not ignored these developments and has implemented several measures to tackle the childhood obesity issue. These include the 40kph school zones in Victoria, helping to alleviate parents' fears and encouraging them to let their children walk (or ride a bike) to school; the "Good food" tuckshops in schools, The Vitality Crunch Challenge and Go-for-your-life campaigns, along with the walking bus or buddy walk to school schemes being initiated by community groups. Generally all of these programs focus on children of school age, yet studies reveal that obesity is becoming increasingly prevalent in pre-schoolers.

Implementing programs that can beneficially influence pre-school children is a more challenging area. While most parents are doing their best to control the development of their children, television and other forms of electronic media are playing an ever more influential role in shaping their tastes and desires. Advertisers have long recognised these opportunities, along with the notion that children can and do influence their parents buying habits and that targeting advertising at children, even of a very young age, has a positive effect on sales.

More than a decade ago we began to see exceptional changes in the targeting of advertising and promotional messages at children. Marketers began splitting their target audiences into very refined groups - teens, tweens, 5-8 year olds, pre-schoolers and even toddlers. Product placement in kid's TV shows became increasingly prevalent and provided another effective promotional tool. The licensing of their favourite movie, television and cartoon characters to big convenience food corporations has also had a major impact on children's purchasing decisions (as well as their parents). An obvious affect of these successful marketing strategies is that both parents and children are becoming increasingly reliant on fast food, junk food and microwave meals.

Recent years have seen an explosion in electronic media targeted directly at the youngest children in our society. Globally this includes a booming market for videos and DVDs aimed at toddlers, TV shows targeted specifically at preliterate children under two and a multi-million dollar industry selling computer games and even special keyboard toppers for children as young as nine months old. This immersion of very young children, from a few months to a few years old, into the world of electronic and interactive media is a potentially revolutionary phenomenon and its impact on their development is not yet known.

It is within this social environment that a concerted effort must be made to curb the childhood obesity problem - improving our children's health and fitness is essential for their future wellbeing. We need a holistic approach that will take account of the diverse factors leading to this problem and help to reverse the trend, where the efforts of the various concerned groups, both Government and community can be focused not just on reducing childhood obesity levels but ultimately on its prevention. We can't turn back the clock to the days of childhood innocence that most of us remember, accepting the current situation, we believe that the best hope of meeting these goals is through a media driven strategy.

Of all communication mediums, television is currently the most pervasive; it reaches into almost every home and even into many children's bedrooms. It can be more influential when supported by books, computer games, DVD and the Internet. Successful programs such as Sesame Street and Play School have helped to shape our children's characters and values and have guided them on the path to learning. While most pre-school television tends to focus on literacy and numeracy, it is encouraging to see new kids' shows like Boohbah from the UK expanding on these learning areas and attempting to actively engage children mentally and physically.

Active Kidz (produced in Queensland for the ABC) is one program promoting exercise and physical activity to school age children, but exercise programs are not always suitable for pre-schoolers. There are also several new children's cooking shows, again this is encouraging, but they seem more appropriate for an older age bracket. A television program designed to help in the growth and development of younger children should incorporate a balanced message; encouraging spontaneous physical activity which is well-integrated into daily life, along with promoting a more positive attitude to eating fruit and vegetables and to drinking water - rather than the usual pre-sweetened drinks.

Importantly, any program promoting healthy eating and fitness to young children must be careful not to create a negative body image. Children's exposure to the media, particularly advertising, is affecting the way they think about their bodies and what an "ideal" body might be. An article in The Age (8/3/05) by Amanda Dunn reported that; "Looking at 81 girls aged 5 to 8, researchers at Adelaide's Flinders University found that 47% of them wanted to be thinner, a proportion that rose dramatically with age. By grade 2, more than 71% expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies and even amongst the youngest, cultural messages about body shape had been absorbed, with almost 29% of the five-year-olds wishing they were thinner."

Of course in conceiving a children's television program we must remember that the primary responsibility for the upbringing of children resides with their parents. As mentioned earlier, remedies for the growing obesity problem must involve support and information for parents, particularly on such things as the significant social and health benefits associated with the family meal, or the need to set a good example. Interestingly, as many television advertisers have discovered, an excellent way to reach and influence parents is through marketing aimed at their own children.

Getting kids interested in physical activity and healthy food choice can be an important first step in raising parents' awareness of potential weight problems. No parent likes to be told that they aren't doing their job properly - developing their own awareness of the issue is vital in motivating them to seek advice or help. Integrating the TV show with a website, featuring a kids section with free games and downloads, creates an opportunity to guide parents to their own dedicated section of the site - offering friendly and helpful suggestions, expert opinion, downloadable fact sheets and links to community support groups or Government health guidelines.

There is currently no pre-school television program on air that is designed specifically to address the growing problem of childhood obesity. For this reason, we believe there is an urgent need for an engaging and entertaining kids' show that promotes healthy eating habits and increased physical activity while presenting stories and characters with sound ethics and values. It might seem daunting attempting to give these things the "cool" makeover but perhaps we can win the hearts and minds of these young kids by adopting some of the same sophisticated methods and self-empowering communication strategies currently used in advertising.

Growfit Media is a company that has been formed specifically to tackle the growing problem of childhood obesity. The directors of this new company are David Dickeson and James Widdowson, they are both parents and between them have nearly 50 years experience in the world of advertising and communications.

As a business manager with strong links to the health care industry David was well aware of the growing problem of childhood obesity and in late 2004 approached James with the idea of creating a children's television program to address the issue. James, a television commercials and promo director with his own production company, responded enthusiastically and immediately began to research existing knowledge on the many complex, contributing factors and current prevention strategies. With help from a range of creative associates, including scriptwriters, illustrators, animators and composers, he has since developed a creative concept for such a program with the working title of - The Little Big Kids.

There is still much to be done before such a program can become a reality, but after receiving a positive response when discussing their aims and ideas with several healthcare professionals and educators, David and James have been strongly encouraged to pursue their objectives.

David has also received a number of substantial no-strings-attached financial pledges from concerned companies, Government and industry bodies should this proposal secure a broadcast agreement within Australia.

Our Vision

There is currently an urgent need to address the unhealthy eating habits and lack of fitness affecting many young Australian children.

An appropriate diet and plenty of physical activity are essential for the healthy growth and development of young children.

Optimised health during childhood will help to maintain health and fitness throughout adolescence and the later years of life.

Television is the best medium to reach and influence a wide range of young children, particularly those most at risk of developing weight problems.

Our Objective

To create a highly popular and entertaining children's television program, incorporating stories and messages that encourage healthy eating and increased physical activity.

To develop a commercially attractive package with broad international appeal, excellent production standards and low production costs.

To support the television program with a website that incorporates an interactive kids section and a parents and carers section with helpful advice, downloadable information and links to relevant community support groups, government and non-government websites.

To produce a range of supportive media, including a computer game, DVD titles, music CDs, books and print material.

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