Position: Who’s Responsible For Obesity?

Proposal: How To Solve It

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From Un-Healthy Children To Un-Healthy Adults...The Blame Game

All sides continually point fingers as to who is to blame for the rising epidemic of overweight and obese youth in America, and indeed as it spreads worldwide. The fragmenting confusion stems from articles with headlines such as this:

“Attention, parents! More than one in three middle school students who regularly eat school lunches are obese or overweight.” (Laino)

This author is a firm believer that there is enough blame to go around equally. The Position is that there cannot be a singular source to blame, nor a singular solution. The following Positions will be explored by questions of Who, What, Where, When, Why and How.

The attempt will be to illustrate the fallacy of finger pointing and crucial necessity of shouldering blame and responsibility in a unified solution for the following topics:

- Education for healthy lifestyles
- Eating from a healthy menu
- Physical fitness
- Culminating the first three for positive mental health
Who’s Responsible?

Education is the domain of the government right? Not necessarily so, before the public school system came along, families would pass down through the generations what was good to eat and the active lifestyles like hard work, hunting, farming etc. were common knowledge taught by parents and grandparents.

Parents have been critical of both corporations and governments for not taking action against unhealthy foods in schools; however, is this the easy way out? That same parent may bring home fast food because it’s cheaper and easier than a home cooked meal. However again, that same parent may be saying “I give up!”, reading an article comment like this:

The school-lunch kids also were less likely to participate in active sports like basketball, moderate exercise like walking, or team sports than their home-fed counterparts. And they spent more time watching TV, playing video games, and using computers outside of school. (Puska, Nishida, and Porter pg 1)

Many governments are setup to protect their citizens and facilitate the common good for all. The demands of parents are clear, they want help and protection – help will educating and instigating a healthier lifestyle for their children and protection from junk/fast food profiteers. Of course those corporate profiteers will state that it is not their mandate to create socially responsible foods and fitness items…but should it be?

Many corporations have attempted to create newer healthier food items, but claim kids won’t eat it – and politicians have not been willing to regulate against the strong contributory arms of Food Lobbyists. So what’s a parent to do?
What to Change?

What’s on the Menu? - Arguably, it’s not only the menu that needs to change, it’s also the amount. Here the government states they’ve provided the *daily values and guidelines*. However, in a world of all-you-can-eat buffets and super-sized value meals, families are like heroin addicts and corporation the dope peddlers…or are they? Corporations would likely state – *Look we just make the stuff, you don’t have to eat everything on your plate or come back for round 2, 3, 4…*

Exercise? What For? - I would also argue that the education of youth in American needs major reform – both physical fitness and health awareness curriculums could benefit greatly from a collaborative effort from all three entities (parents, governments and corporations). Some in government may argue that this is not the responsibility of schools. However, to teach and prepare youth to be of benefit to the common good of society is exactly what should be taught in public and private schools. Corporations may shun direct involvement, but imagine the profits that could be generated by investing a minor amount of R&D into making healthy foods that every kid would eat,
and every school would order on a daily basis! Of course Government and Corporate involvement would be undermined when kids who just ate healthy and exercised at school came home to a sedentary family life. Does that mean parents have to be responsible too? Yes, they will have to show restraint at the buffet and reduce dining out and junk food to a ‘reward’ status rather than a norm. Then go for a walk, play a physically active video game or just Zumba!

Again, the goal is to spread the burden around so that the task feels less monumental, yes it’s easier to say “the government should “make it a law that fast food corporations serve it up healthy” or “that government should have socialized health spas and massive cafeterias to feed the perfect balanced meal” or “that parents should be penalized for unhealthy children”. Such finger points lead to less freedom and would not solve the problem in a balanced manner. It takes three unified legs to support the healthy goals our children depend on.

**Where to Begin?**

Many may say it should begin with Parents, however, as with other challenges like ‘recycling’, perhaps it needs to begin in school, coupled with a strong homework
regiment that requires the interaction of parents; sponsored by Corporations that promote related goods and services, with subsidies by the Government. The re-enforcing reward would be a grading system for tax breaks to families living up to a health improvement rubric, signed off at milestones by their health care physician.

There are many possibilities whether grass-roots meets government mandated, benefitting from corporate resourcefulness. As the politicians say -- *I don't care how you get it done, just do something!*

**When Benefits Begin?**

Many would argue that the damage to the current generation is not reversible, that people don’t change and that only the next generation would benefit if we start now. However, with the right programs educating parents and youth, as well as, corporate and government sponsorship, then changes to various social issues may almost be immediate.

Anyone who may watch “America’s Biggest Loser” or see examples like Al Roker on NBC’s Today show, can’t help but to feel inspired. However, that inspiration fades without that synergistic trio working in tandem. I’ve seen both old and young (including myself – 40lbs less today) having sustained weight loss.
Even if some yo-yoing occurs; the mental state-of-mind is forever changed when you realize you can do it!

If all three work together, we benefit personally, which benefits society; and that renewed feeling translates through to a person's work which benefits corporations, which improves profits and provides more tax revenue benefits to the government, which funds more health awareness and the cycle continues.

**Why All Entities Should Care?**

Since 1994, the monitoring of obesity by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention illustrates the tragic trend for America within just 16 years. At this rate, greater than 30% of the entire US population will be obese.

**Why should parents care?** Without parents examples, youth may not be motivated (*monkey see, monkey do*). Without a grass roots involvement, government may not
care (too many other problems with lobby’s grabbing for attention). Without responsible spending, corporations get the wrong signals! You have to vote for healthier foods and physically active video games and past-times by the only voice corporations understand...your

**Why should corporations care?** In other Position Papers I’ve emphasized the importance for corporations to change and consider social impacts in the quest for profits. Whether it’s reducing water use, carbon footprints, resource depletion and now healthy lifestyles, all these challenges if viewed from the fundamentals of accounting and profits, should not need to be government legislated at corporations. Bottom line, a worker can’t be productive while at the hospital under a triple by-pass or worse on a gurney. Workers may be less productive if they are depressed or physically slowed by their health circumstances. Therefore, a loss of productivity equals a loss of work, which = (loss of income) + (loss of spending) = total loss of corporate profits.

*It is estimate that the economic cost of overweight and obesity can be as much as 8% of total national health budgets...a considerable economic burden...for the taxpayer. (Alexander, and Bauer)*

**Why should governments care?** Every government should care about the optimal health of its citizens. The benefits outweigh the costs. A more healthy, happy and productive society can make for a stronger economy which can increase tax revenues to support future infrastructure and social needs. For “governments of the people, by the people, for the people” (Basler), the obligations become even more apparent.

*To help fight the battle against obesity, the food industry must team up with the government, academia, and the medical community to help inform consumers, strengthen nutrition education, and develop healthier product choices. (Verduin, Agarwal, and Waltman)*
Conclusion, How Will It End?

Going back to who was originally responsible, it was the family unit, and then came the government and finally the corporations. This dynamic dichotomy crept in over hundreds of years, but there is no reason that all three entities could not be re-balanced and re-defined into a symbiotic relationship where all stand to benefit in common. All entities - Parents, Corporations and Governments - should be unified in the common goal to educate parents and youth on the benefits of a healthy diet and active lifestyle. Corporations and Governments should care in order to preserve profits, expand GDP (gross domestic product) and have their customers/citizens live longer healthier and more productive lives.

Parents should care first and foremost because they love their children and want what really is best for them; to live longer, healthier and happier lives.
Introduction:

The problem of overweight and obese youth is growing into an epidemic; the need for change has become critical.

There is a clear and present danger related to America’s weight problem, and that has spread to other countries.

Therefore it needs a global solution.

Obesity and overweight pose a major risk for chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, and certain forms of cancer. (Puska, Nishida, and Porter pg 1)

The problem is starting to catch the attention of governments, even corporations that want to keep their health care costs to a minimum. Ironically the solution may be within the grasp of both, if combined with a third instigator, the children’s parents. The purpose of this proposal is to detail a unified three legged approach that involves parents, governments and corporations in a ‘Plan of Attack’ that could slow the epidemic and possibly stop and reverse the trend.

CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Almost 1 in 5 youth between the ages of 6 and 19 is obese (BMI ≥ 95th percentile of the CDC growth chart).

61% of obese children aged 5–10 years have one or more risk factors for heart disease, and 27% have two or more.

("Power of Prevention - Chronic disease...the public health challenge of the 21st century" pg 4)
What Are The Causes, And Just How Bad Is It?

Being overweight and obese isn’t a result of modern society. It has most likely been around since the dawn of humans. The difference is, most of those cases were related to a genetic disorder, where the body simply could not break down foods properly. Many cultures valued it as a unique trait and even perpetuated the disorder, such as with Sumo wrestlers. Other cultures equated it to having the ability to give a healthy birth. Still others saw it as protection, “Our biggest guy in the tribe will fight yours to settle the argument”.

The difference is today anyone can become overweight and then possibly obese – the causes are a combination of poor dietary foods being ingested, the over consumption of cheap easy access to healthy foods (more than the body can handle or needs) and the sedentary lifestyles of TV, internet, cells and videogames.
Where are children up to 8 hours of their active day?  SCHOOL!  This should become a primary battleground to resolve the problem.  Using the Five Senses is a strategy junk food makers excel at.  If health food was promoted using the same methodology, perhaps there would be a sea-change in the minds of minors.  Imagine having commercials with sights of giggling, happy healthy children and teens eating only healthy foods, and at the same time Hearing the latest music hits to further draw the associative link of enjoyment to healthy eating.  Combine it all with those same kids at a school assembly just before lunch and pump the room with smells of savory seasoned foods that they can immediately touch and taste; then the re-programming and hopeful reversal of the Junk Food addictions can commence.

Also, this author feels that changing the nature of P.E. in schools from contact sports centric, to a health and exercise centric program, with equipment, aerobics, Zumba, weight training, jogging etc. would be a great way to promote lifestyle changes that are permanent.  Even if a student sat on an exercise bike (whining), and gave them a PSP or Wii that would ‘pause the game’ if they stop, they’d be more inclined to complete the task; and be more active than at any other time during the day.  The stimulation of the videogame during exercise associates a positive mental experience with what is otherwise less enjoyable to the average teen.  It would also train their brains to multi-task; a positive side effect.
The Implementation

The following Major Steps could be a big step in the right direction:

1) Start in schools with a menu change, a withdrawal of unhealthy offerings (soda, candy, chips etc.) and the installation of healthy vendors at a reduced cost (as those approved vendors get subsidy funds for creating substitutes that kids actually want).

2) Re-enforce that new dynamic by requiring a health class segment at every grade level that teaches healthy lifestyles, even provides a healthy after school snack and homework of menus that parents are required to sign.

3) Implements a new exercise regimen that allows children and teens to be more active without resenting it. These should be exercise that will stay with them as individuals throughout their life and not “contact sports” that some kids resent.

Conclusion

The following recommendations could be implemented today and provide the foundation for change that could create a ripple effect throughout society, and at the corporate and government level.

Summary of Recommendations

1) Restrict non-health products from schools
2) Subsidize corporations to incentivize healthier school food, drink and snack production
3) Teach youth - health and fitness at their pace, in forms they like and can perform solo
4) Require confirmation signatures and milestone tracking from parents - for kids health homework; which includes exercises, eating less and choosing healthier foods
5) Give tax deductions to motivate a healthier family (in tandem with #4)
Just implementing the recommendations above would provide a world of difference to millions, and the effects of these changes could have immediate results. The list below recaps those improvements to all entities involved.

**Summary of Benefits**

1) Reduced current and future health care costs  
2) Improved current and future corporate productivity  
3) Happier healthier citizens  
4) Happier healthier families  
5) Stronger more productive country and government

Imagine where society would be, if we would have implemented the plan 20 years ago. How the lives of countless many, who suffered both physical and emotional effects of being overweight or obese, could have had a very different life experience. Its time to change.
Works Cited:


