Overweight and Obesity

Obesity is not only a problem for adults, its dramatic increase in children has become a disturbing national epidemic and public health concern that warrants our attention. In the United States, 10 percent of children between ages 5 and 17 are obese and more than 30 percent are overweight *(International Obesity Task Force, 2004)*. Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults.

When is a child obese?
Obesity means having too much body fat in relation to lean body mass. A measurement of Body Mass Index (BMI) is used to assess overweight and obesity. BMI is the ratio of weight in kilograms to the square of height in meters (kg/m^2). BMI between the 85th and 95th percentiles for age and sex is considered at risk of overweight, and BMI above the 95th percentile is considered overweight or obese.

Why do children become overweight?
While in some cases heredity and genes play a role, very few children are overweight because of underlying medical problems. The main causes of childhood obesity are unhealthy eating habits and low level of physical activity. When a child eats more calories than his body can burn, the extra calories are stored as fat. Everyone has some stored fat, but too much fat results in the unhealthy condition of being overweight.

What are the health consequences?
Obesity in children is a serious issue with health and social consequences that often continue into adulthood.

Physical risks of being overweight. Obese children have shown an alarming increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes, a disease that previously was typically seen in adults. Many obese children have high cholesterol and blood pressure levels, which are risk factors for developing heart disease and stroke. Obese children also have a high incidence of orthopedic problems, liver disease, asthma and certain types of cancer. One of the most severe problems for obese children is sleep apnea (interrupted breathing while sleeping). In some cases this can lead to problems with learning and memory.

Social and emotional outcomes. Social discrimination may be more disturbing to an overweight child than physical health problems. Research shows that obesity can be harmful to children's mental health. Children who are teased frequently can develop low self-esteem, behavior and learning problems, and depression.

What is the best way to help children reduce weight?
Management of obesity in children is often focused on slowing or stopping the progress of weight gain rather than weight loss so the child grows into a normal body weight over a period of months to years. Parents and child care providers can play a very important role in helping overweight children.

Physical activity. Evidence shows that promoting exercise to burn calories helps more than restricting calories, and it's more fun. Offer regular opportunities for children to engage in physical activities. Organize indoor and outdoor activities and reduce screen time (television, computer, videos) to two or less hours per day.

Diet management. Provide nutritious meals and snacks based on the new dietary guidelines for children. Keep on hand water, fruits, vegetables, yogurt and low-fat snacks; keep fatty and sugary snacks to a minimum, especially sugar sweetened beverages such as soda. Never put a child on a low-calorie diet; lower the amount of fat in food, but maintain calories by increasing the consumption of fruit, vegetables, cereals and bread.

Behavior modification. Avoid using food as a reward or punishment. Have family meals and set a good example by eating a wide variety of food. Discourage children from teasing each other about their size and weight. Teasing can emotionally harm children, leading to low self-esteem, depression and further weight gain.

References
AAP Policy Statement: Pediatrics Vol. 112 No. 2 August 2003, pp. 424-430.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Obesity and Over-weight Information (https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html).

American Obesity Association (www.obesity.org).