



**What you and  
your family  
can do**

## 5. A family affair

People often react defensively when challenged about what they eat, or other aspects of their lifestyle. That's not surprising. It can feel like a personal attack when someone, or even some magazine or newspaper article, questions the way you bring up your family. As well, some people may be in denial, and others may not realise the impact their everyday decisions have on their family's health. So take a deep breath if you feel your hackles start to rise during this chapter—its aim is not to attack or criticise you, but to motivate and empower you.

But there's no point beating around the bush: this chapter is no picnic. It will challenge you to examine your own beliefs and behaviours. You can't lay the foundations for good health in your children without also working on your own wellbeing. Here are a few reasons why good health is a family affair:

- If a child is overweight or inactive or eating poorly, one of the worst things that can happen is for that child and their weight to become the focus of everyone's attention. This can make the child feel awful, and they may respond by maintaining their behaviour. It will be far more effective and better for the child if the whole family environment changes

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in a way that makes it easier for everyone to eat well and be active.

- If a child is overweight or inactive or eating poorly, chances are some other family members have the same problems, which means that everyone will benefit from making some changes to family habits.
- Previous chapters have discussed how difficult the modern world makes it for children to achieve good health. This doesn't mean that parents are powerless. Parents have a huge impact on the micro-environment children grow up in, even if the task sometimes feels overwhelming.
- Children are like sponges. From their earliest days, they soak up what they see their parents, brothers and sisters and significant others doing. Parents are powerful role models. If you enjoy eating well and being active, your children are likely to do the same. Your children are more likely to do what you do, rather than what you say they should do.
- Of course making changes to your daily habits and routines is far easier said than done. Anyone who's ever tried to do it knows how hard it can be. This chapter will give you some tips for making change easier. It's about creating positive new habits, rather than obsessing about bad old ones.

The good news is that even relatively small steps can lead to big improvements in your family's health and wellbeing. The aim is not to create a perfect family with the perfect lifestyle and the perfect children. Striving for perfection can be soul-destroying, frustrating and not much fun. And it sets you up for failure. Far better to find a way to make a healthy lifestyle as enjoyable and as sustainable as possible for you and your family.

## Five tips for a healthy family

### Tip 1. Be aware

A father recently told me about how someone had described his teenage children as fat. He was shaking his head about it. His kids were not fat, he said. They were just a bit chunky, and it was nothing to worry about. It was an uncomfortable moment. I knew his children were more than just a bit overweight. Even though I hadn't seen them in their swimmers lately, I was pretty sure their BMIs would fall in the obese range. But I didn't speak up. No one likes to be told that their children are fat. Our society is so obsessed with thinness and so judgmental about fatness that it is not surprising many parents find it difficult to acknowledge when their children have a weight problem. It is especially difficult for parents who are self-conscious about their own size or lifestyle.

Many studies have shown that parents often do not recognise or acknowledge when their children are overweight or obese. They prefer to use words like 'heavy' or 'solid', and often do not see excess weight as a health issue. They are more likely to see it as a social problem. Parents are more likely to be concerned about their children's poor nutrition or inactivity than their weight.<sup>1</sup> When the NSW Health Department commissioned focus groups to research parents' attitudes, they found that parents typically see childhood obesity as an important issue—but not for them or their children. It is someone else's problem. A number of research groups, in Australia and elsewhere, have found that it is not always appreciated when they tell parents about their findings. Many parents do not welcome being told, by researchers or anyone else, that their children are overweight.

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Perhaps some are in denial, or feel guilty, as if their children's weight reflects poorly on them and their parenting. Well-meaning friends and family can reinforce this kind of denial: if you heard a friend wondering aloud whether their overweight child was carrying too much weight, how would you respond? It's often easier for everyone to look the other way.

As well, being overweight has become so common that it is now seen as normal. Children who once would have been considered a normal weight can now look thin in comparison with their classmates. And some parents worry that focusing on children's weight may encourage eating disorders or affect children's self-esteem.

Another reason many parents might not want to acknowledge their children's weight is their own waistlines. In 2000, just over two-thirds of Australian men and half of Australian women were overweight. But many adults who are overweight or even obese do not think they have a weight problem.<sup>2</sup> The rates are likely to be significantly higher among parents with overly heavy children. Why would parents be concerned about their children's weight if they do not recognise that their own weight may be a health hazard?

Awareness of a problem is the first step in making change of any sort. No one is going to be bothered to make a change unless they are aware that there is a problem that needs work and attention. Are you aware of the health and weight issues for you and your family?

Even if you and your family are already doing pretty well on this score, the obesogenic environment we all live in means you may face issues in the future. It's far easier and more effective to stop the problem arising than to try to do something once there is a weight problem—remember, our

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bodies are very determined to maintain the weight we gain. Scientists have calculated that someone who was once obese requires 10 to 15 per cent fewer calories to maintain their normal weight than someone of the same body composition who was never obese. This is because muscles become much more efficient after weight loss—they need fewer calories to perform the same amount of work. The body's metabolic processes continue to fight your attempts to maintain your reduced body weight for years after you lost the weight.<sup>3</sup> It's far better to avoid weight gain in the first place.

It is also important to be aware of your own attitudes and beliefs. Many parents believe it is all too hard, that weight is predestined, and that they have little influence over their children's lives. Many associate being a good parent with giving their children treats. They feel as if they are depriving their children if they don't give them sweets. Or they think their children are safer in front of the TV than playing in the park.

Taking some time to think about your family's beliefs and behaviours around food, activity, health and weight might give you some ideas about where change might be both possible and helpful.

### **Tip 2. Model behaviour**

I know we haven't met, but I know at least three things about you (maybe this is a book of conspiracies after all...). One is that you probably underestimate how much you eat, just as I, and most other people, do. Researchers have called this the 'eye-mouth gap'.<sup>4</sup> Another is that you probably think your diet is healthier than it really is—something researchers call 'dietary optimism'.<sup>5</sup> One study of Melbourne families found that the more confident parents were about their children

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having a healthy diet, the more likely the children were to eat plenty of snack foods and few vegetables.<sup>6</sup>

The third thing we have in common is that we probably both overestimate how active we are—this one is called the foot–brain gap.

Keep these gaps between perceptions and reality in mind when you read the next section, which sets out three ways that parents and others who play important roles in children’s lives can be healthy role models.

### **Modelling healthy eating**

This is not only about what you eat; it’s also about how you eat and how you feel about food and eating. Do you eat breakfast? Do you enjoy family meals at the table with the television off? Are healthy meals a pleasure rather than a punishment? Does the crunch of an apple make you salivate? Do you miss vegetables if you don’t have them for a few days? Do you feel good about eating? Do you enjoy the occasional splurge on your favourite chocolate or ice cream without feeling a hint of guilt?

Don’t feel bad if ‘yes’ is not your honest and instinctive answer to these questions. Many people are in the same boat. Many struggle with their attitudes to food and have difficulty meeting healthy eating recommendations. Only about 1 in 5 adults eats enough vegetables, according to a recent large NSW study. We do better in the fruit stakes but still less than 50 per cent of adults eat enough fruit.<sup>7</sup>

Mothers are a particularly powerful influence on children’s food choices, and not only because they so often are responsible for shopping and cooking. They often are the family’s authority on food and diet, so they wield extra clout as role models. A number of studies have shown that mothers who like soft

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drinks, snacks, sweets and fast foods are more likely to have children who like those foods. Research has found that a mother's liking for confectionery was the strongest predictor of whether children aged 9 to 11 ate sweets. Meanwhile, mothers who drink milk rather than soft drink are more likely to have daughters who do the same.<sup>8</sup> The researchers concluded that efforts to increase young girls' calcium intake should target mothers as well as daughters. And when parents eat fruit and vegetables, their children are more likely to do the same.<sup>9</sup>

Chapters 7 to 9 give detailed advice to help you and your family get a bigger health kick from your food.

### **Modelling an active lifestyle**

Do you moan if you can't get a car park close to your destination? Does leaving home always mean hopping in the car? Does working up a sweat make you feel sick and miserable? Did you spend more time watching TV yesterday than walking or running? Do you automatically hop in the lift or jump on the elevator, rather than finding the stairs? Are you too busy most days to fit in a walk or a trip to the gym?

Don't feel bad if 'yes' was your honest and instinctive answer to these questions. Changes to our work and leisure have made it difficult for most adults to be active enough in daily life to benefit their health. Only 45 per cent of adults are physically active enough to meet health recommendations, according to a recent NSW study.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, a national study found that 15 per cent of adults do no physical activity at all.<sup>11</sup>

Some studies suggest that fathers who are physically active are particularly likely to influence children to be more active.

Chapter 10 gives detailed advice to help you and your family make physical activity an enjoyable part of your daily life.

### Obsess not

It is no coincidence that an epidemic of weight gain has arisen at the same time as a flourishing weight loss industry promoting an epidemic of dieting. I include in the 'weight loss industry' those magazines, book publishers and others who make a profit out of promoting unnaturally thin figures and unhealthy, unnatural eating patterns—also known as the latest diet fads. Dieting inevitably leads to overeating, even in experiments on animals, and is associated with an increased risk of weight gain. A cynic might think that the weight loss industry keeps itself in business by promoting dieting—exactly the technique to ensure that customers always come back for more 'miracle cures' (which don't work).

Many parents, especially mothers, are caught in a vicious circle. They worry about their weight, which makes them try to restrict what they eat, which is difficult and leads to bingeing, which makes them feel guilty, which makes them eat more, which makes them worry about their weight, which means they are soon back where they started on this circle. And so it continues.<sup>12</sup> These eating patterns often lead to weight fluctuations or weight cycling, and these make it physiologically and psychologically more difficult to keep weight off. This vicious circle is often passed down from generation to generation. The world being the way it is, it tends to be women who are most worried about their weight, and so it tends to be mothers who often 'infect' their daughters with the dieting bug and body-image concerns. Some research suggests that this begins very early in girls' lives, even before they are old enough to go to school.<sup>13</sup>

Focusing on children's weight can have lifelong repercussions, especially for girls. Teenage girls who diet are more likely to feel

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worthless, and to be depressed and socially anxious. They are also more likely to be dissatisfied with their body, and to be heavier.<sup>14</sup> There are so many women and teenage girls who are unhappy with their body size and shape that some experts believe such discontent has become the norm, from very early in life. Preoccupation with weight can be crippling, leading to disordered eating as well as the less common but more serious eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. Obsessing about your body's shape or size is not good for mental health or self-confidence. One study showed that the fear of being weighed was one of the most important factors in women postponing or cancelling medical appointments.<sup>15</sup> Another serious consequence of weight obsession is the use of cigarettes as a form of weight control.<sup>16</sup> But perhaps the worst thing about weight obsessing is that it is likely to encourage patterns of behaviour that promote weight gain.

Then there's the more general wellbeing issue: if you are spending so much of your life worrying about your figure or your weight, you have less space in your head and less time and energy for focusing on the things that really matter in life. Rather than encouraging children to worry about their weight, parents should set an example by not focusing on their own shape or size. If you tell your children that it's not their size or shape that matters, but at the same time you obsess about how you measure up to the 'stick insects' in fashion magazines, you know which message they will take in.

One expert who has specialised in treating eating disorders says there are two types of obese people: the emotionally healthy and the emotionally unhealthy.<sup>17</sup> Those in the second group see weight as their most important feature, and they put life on hold until they can get thin. An emotionally healthy

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obese person might prefer to be thinner, but doesn't let their weight dominate their life. The other key difference between the two groups was their parents' attitudes. Those in the second group had parents who were preoccupied with their children's weight.

Do yourself and your family a favour. Forget about fad diets and put away the bathroom scales. Counting kilograms or calories is a waste of time at many levels—for a start, it's time that could be spent more productively or enjoyably. Aim to be healthy and fit, rather than to be a so-called ideal body shape or size.

Instead of talking to your children about their weight, talk about the benefits of healthy eating and being fit and active. Think about what issues will matter most for them, at their stage of life. For example, many children may not be particularly inspired to know that eating fruit and vegies may help reduce their cancer risk; they might be more interested in knowing that healthy eating will help give them lots of energy, make them strong, and help them do better at school and sport.

### What the research says

- Girls who put on weight between ages 5 and 7 were more likely to have mothers who put on weight, according to a study that examined more than 150 girls from Pennsylvania (in the United States) when they were 5, 7 and 9. It also found that girls who put on weight were more likely to have less active fathers who had a high energy intake. The researchers said their findings highlight the importance of the family, and thus of involving parents in treating childhood weight problems.<sup>18</sup>

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- Girls who were heavier at 5 were more likely at age 9 to restrict what they ate as well as to eat to excess when they were not hungry, according to the same study. These girls were also more likely to be concerned about their weight and dissatisfied with their body, and to have put on weight. The researchers said their findings were consistent with other research showing that children's attempts to control their weight may promote weight gain.<sup>19</sup>
- The same study found that children as young as 5 are sensitive to their parents' perceptions of their weight: 5-year-old girls were more likely to think negatively about their body if their fathers were concerned about their weight. The researchers said this suggested that how parents and society deal with children who are overweight may affect the psychological health of children. 'Public health programs that simply raise parental awareness about childhood overweight without providing parents with concrete alternatives for addressing their concerns about their child's weight status may be harmful,' they said.<sup>20</sup>
- Five-year-old girls were more likely to think about dieting if their mothers had dieted recently, the same study found. More than 90 per cent of the mothers reported dieting recently. 'Women should be informed that weight control attempts may influence their young daughters' emerging ideas, concepts and beliefs about dieting,' the researchers concluded.<sup>21</sup>
- Another study, involving children aged 7 to 13, found that almost half were concerned about their weight, more than a third had already tried to lose weight and almost a tenth showed some signs of anorexia nervosa. Another study of almost 2000 high school students found that 11 per cent of girls could be classified as 'emotional eaters', meaning they binged and felt out of control about food.<sup>22</sup>

## **Against the odds: learning from the minority**

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It has become the norm these days for people to gain weight, adding a kilogram or two every year or so. But what about those who don't? Why are they different and what can we learn from them?

This was the thinking behind a study that followed 165 married couples, mostly in their thirties, over a 4 year period.<sup>23</sup> Only 13 per cent of men and 22 per cent of women were normal weight at the start of the study and stayed at or near that weight for the next 4 years. The women in this group ate fewer calories than other women, were less likely to diet or binge, and were more inclined to be active and participate in sports during leisure time. They were also more likely to have been lean as children, and their husbands were also more likely than other women's husbands to be active and lean.

The men who kept a healthy weight during the study ate less fat and more fruit and vegetables than other men, and were also less likely to diet or binge on food.

Although many people believe that some people can eat what they like, never exercise and stay trim, the researchers did not find evidence of that. Instead, they concluded that a healthy, stable weight reflected 'maintainable lifestyle behaviours' rather than conscious extreme efforts to resist weight gain. The findings also suggested that it's easier to maintain a healthier lifestyle if your partner is on the same wavelength.

### Who's helping you?

When Karen Drayton rejoined the workforce after having two sons, she would never have guessed what a difference the new job would make to her family. For 18 months, Karen worked as personal assistant to Professor Kerin O'Dea, an international expert on the links between diet, lifestyle and health who was at that time the director of the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin.

Through her work, Karen gained a better understanding of the effects of an unhealthy diet, and the benefits of exercise and eating plenty of fruit and vegetables. She also learnt, in graphic detail, about the many devastating consequences of type 2 diabetes. As a result of discussions with her boss, Karen made some changes to her family's routines. She and her husband Mark and their young sons Matthew and Alex became used to having water instead of soft drink or cordial with meals.

Karen became more conscious of reading food labels when shopping, and stopped putting packets of chips in her sons' lunchboxes. She also became more conscious of setting an example, and made a determined effort to squeeze exercise into her schedule.

Karen, who is in her early thirties, has a number of relatives with type 2 diabetes who are overweight. Looking back, she realised that she didn't have many healthy role models when she was growing up. But she was lucky, she says, to find a boss who was a role model. She credits Kerin with helping her make positive changes to her family's health. 'Kerin's so active and energetic,' says Karen. 'She doesn't deprive herself of food, but she doesn't eat rubbish.'

Not everyone has first-hand access to public health experts like Kerin O'Dea. But have a look around. Who can you learn from in your circle of friends, relatives and acquaintances? Who can help inspire and support you in making changes to your everyday routines?

### **Tip 3. Get real**

By day, Tracey Wilson works to improve the health of her local community in Victoria's Central Highlands, around Ballarat. She manages a Primary Care Partnership, an alliance of health and welfare organisations. One of its top priorities is promoting physical activity and healthy eating.

Not surprisingly, these have also been priorities for Tracey and her husband Bernard in bringing up their two sons. The boys, now teenagers, both enjoy cooking, eating well and being fit and active. With both parents working full-time, this hasn't always been easy to do. A lot of planning and co-operation from everyone has been involved.

'The boys are a fantastic help,' says Tracey. 'They're interested in what we're going to have for tea, and will help out in the kitchen.'

But Tracey says the most important factor is that she and her husband have had a similar philosophy from their sons' earliest days: it is worth making some effort to support the family's health. 'If it's been a smooth ride for us it's because we have a shared understanding of where we're coming from', she says. 'Overall we are on the same page.'

Many parents are not so lucky; many do not get the personal or professional support that Tracey has had.

It is common for parents to have conflicting views about how to bring up their children or what changes might benefit the family. 'I'd be surprised if two people did agree on these things,' says Mary Pekin, who runs the Canberra and Wagga offices of Relationships Australia. 'Most couples, if you took any topic, like washing the dishes, how often you have sex, who takes the garbage out, whatever, are likely to have disagreements.'

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The point is not that parents have to agree about the contents of their children's lunchboxes, Pekin says. But they should be able to listen to each other's point of view, express their own, and from there develop a solution that will work for everyone, especially the children.

Not every family has the skills to do this on their own. But we can learn and practise those skills until, like any habit, they become automatic. And developing these skills has lots of good spin-offs. Children are keen observers. If their parents yell at each other or stop talking to each other for days after having a fight, children won't take much notice if their parents' advice is that they should deal with conflict by talking about it.

And some families are struggling with more pressing issues: mental health problems, drug abuse, domestic violence or financial concerns, for instance. These generally have to be dealt with before it is possible to work on other health issues. But even families facing a bundle of serious problems can sometimes make small changes in their daily lives. This may help give them the confidence to try bigger changes.

Every family is unique, with different dynamics, history, beliefs and priorities. It has been said, not entirely in jest, that every family is dysfunctional in its own sweet way.

How people behave as parents is often influenced by how they were treated as children. What attitudes and behaviours have you absorbed, perhaps without even thinking about it, from your parents or other role models? Who tends to make the decisions in your family, and how?

Studies have shown that parents do not treat all their children the same way. The sex, age, birth order, physical appearance and abilities of the child can affect parents'

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attitudes and behaviours.<sup>24</sup> It is not uncommon for parents to encourage their sons to eat up and bulk up, but to encourage the opposite behaviour in their daughters, for example. The other side of the coin is that individual children will respond differently to the same parenting strategies.

What if the dinner table is full of unspoken and spoken hostilities and tensions? Some experts believe that children whose feeding difficulties cannot be resolved often come from homes where there are wars between the parents.<sup>25</sup>

What if your partner is, perhaps without even realising it, undermining you or threatened by what you are doing? Perhaps he or she doesn't want to stop having soft drink with dinner or eating snacks in front of the TV. Perhaps they come from a long line of couch potatoes and fast food addicts, and can't see any reason for changing their ways. Watch out for what some health professionals call 'silent saboteurs'—these are the people who break open the chocolate just as you're offering the kids a fruit platter.

Or perhaps you and your partner are separated; in this situation both parents may try to overcompensate by buying lots of treats or taking the kids to fast food restaurants. Children are always the losers when they become pawns in hostilities or power struggles between parents.

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, a Melbourne psychologist who specialises in working with adolescents and their families, often comes across people who are resistant to change, or even actively working to sabotage it. Sometimes this goes back to deep-rooted issues such as unresolved grief or physical, sexual or emotional abuse. A child's weight or unhealthy eating patterns may be a symptom of other troubles. Many people turn to food in times of emotional distress. But as Carr-Gregg

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says, 'There's that wonderful old saying—you can't change what you don't acknowledge. We've got to acknowledge what lies under the problem first.'

The perfect family or relationship only exists in movie scripts. The rest of us have to live and work in the real world, where the barriers to changing family behaviour sometimes seem insurmountable. The first step towards developing solutions is awareness. Think about it: how might some of these issues be affecting you and your family and your health?

Ellyn Satter is an internationally recognised nutritionist and therapist (and author) who works with US families whose children are having difficulties related to food and eating. She says that the parents who are prepared to look closely at themselves and what they are doing are the healthy ones. The ones who don't question themselves but just blame the problem on the child are the ones who are likely to be in trouble. 'The blunt truth,' she says, 'is that you can't take your child any further than you have taken yourself.'<sup>26</sup>

### Tip 4. Making change easier

Bad habits, it has been said, are like a comfortable bed. They are easy to get into, but hard to get out of.

Information does not translate into action. Just because we all know we should eat more fruit and vegetables doesn't mean we do it.

Here are a few reasons why people find it so difficult to change:

- Humans are naturally suspicious of change. In an evolutionary sense, habits may protect us. For example, having a routine probably helped our ancestors make sure they had enough food and drink to survive.

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- People tend to filter out information that does not support what they already think and believe. Many people believe they are already doing the best things for themselves and their families. They may not see that there are beneficial changes they could make.
- Failure is demoralising. Many people don't try to change because they are afraid of failing. It's far less confronting to stick with the status quo.
- Changing habits can be uncomfortable, even painful. Starting to do some exercise, when you're not used to it or if you're carrying a bit of excess weight, can leave you sore and sorry.
- Sometimes people want to maintain the status quo, for reasons that are not obvious. 'When women are trying to lose weight, often really subtle things try to undermine that,' says Professor Ann Roche, Director of the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction at Flinders University in Adelaide. 'It might not be seen to be in their partner's interests to have a slim, attractive wife, for instance.' She is suggesting that some men may feel threatened if their partner trims down and becomes more attractive to others.
- Sometimes, of course, it makes perfect sense to resist urgings to change your behaviour—many people and organisations have a stake in trying to make us do things that might not be to our advantage.

## Stages of change

People who work in the drug and alcohol field have developed a model of the stages of change. This adaptation of that model may be useful for others.<sup>27</sup> The stages are:

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1. *Precontemplation.* You are blissfully ignorant of or in denial about the need to change, and are not aware of the benefits it might bring. You think, *I hardly ever eat vegetables but it's not a big deal.* Ask yourself or your doctor or your friends what is known about the link between eating plenty of vegetables and a reduced risk of diseases.
2. *Contemplation.* You may realise the need to do something but feel ambivalent about it. You may see why it's a good idea, but you are also aware of what it will involve. People can stay in this stage for long periods of time. You think, *I know I should eat more vegetables but it's too much of a hassle and I can't be bothered.* If you are in this stage, think about what might help motivate you. Is there a family history of diabetes, cancer or heart disease? Would you like to have more energy? Think about what is stopping you making the change and how you might overcome those things.
3. *Preparing to make change.* You have found a greengrocer who will home deliver a box of vegetables every week. You've been meaning to place an order, but you're so busy that you just haven't got round to it. You think, *Once work settles down, I will get onto it.* If you are in this stage, do something concrete to make it happen. Write a note in your diary to remind yourself to ring the greengrocer next week.
4. *Action.* Your fridge is full of vegetables and you are learning lots of delicious ways to cook them. *It doesn't take that much time after all,* you think. It helps if family and friends are supportive of this change in your lifestyle.
5. *Maintenance/relapse.* You are cooking vegetables at least three times a week. When you unwrap the fish and chips instead on those nights when you really can't be bothered to cook, you try not to whip yourself and concentrate instead on the positive changes that have already occurred. After all, there are still plenty of vegetables in the fridge for tomorrow night.

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6. *Mission achieved.* You don't even think about the vegetable issue any more. Cooking and eating vegetables has become part of your routine. You wouldn't dream of going back to the takeaway diet. *I feel so much better now, you think.*

That's the theory, anyway. Not everyone will move from stages 1 to 6, and not everyone will move through the stages in that order. When people are trying to give up smoking, for example, they typically go through this cycle several times before they quit. So don't give up if you get stuck in a particular stage or have trouble reaching the final goal.

Here are a few tips for making change easier:

- Think about what you want to change and why. If it is going to involve or affect others in the family, make sure they all have a chance to join in the discussion.
- Set your goals, and make sure they are achievable and realistic. Most people don't like being told what to do. They are far more likely to get involved in change if they have had a say in the goals and the strategies for achieving them. Everyone has to be part of the solution.
- Identify where you and the rest of the family are in the model of change. What would help you move to the next stage?
- What are some of the barriers to change? This might be people—perhaps grandparents who show their love by dispensing sweets—or environmental factors, such as the lack of a nearby park. Find ways to overcome or minimise the impact of these barriers.
- Triggers or incentives can encourage and support you in making change. What would work for you and your family?

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- The most skilled experts in behavioural change—marketers—also have lessons for the rest of us. We can learn from how the junk food industry promotes its products. They give away toys with their food because they know this will encourage children to associate their restaurants with having a good time. Work out some similar strategies yourself. If your children get used to having fruit when you're all playing at the park, for instance, they may start to associate fruit with having a good time.
- Different things will motivate different people. What might motivate one family member might be a turn-off for another. Be aware of and respect these differences.
- Don't be put off by setbacks. They are normal. Don't throw your hands in the air just because you've taken two steps back.
- Conditioning is a powerful force. If you always buy a soft drink when you go to the movies, sooner or later you will start to crave that sugar hit as soon as you step into the cinema. Be aware of the emotions and cues that are associated with the behaviours you are trying to change. Try to decrease the negative cues and develop new, positive ones. Take a bottle of water to the movies or have one sitting on the table by the TV. Keep a pair of walking shoes by the door; just the sight of them might be enough to remind you to go for a walk.
- Identify problem areas and plan ways to deflect them. If your mother always arrives laden with chocolates and lollies for the kids, suggest that she might like to give them games instead, to encourage them to play outside—something as simple as a tennis ball, perhaps.
- Try to set up some structures to support the family during the period of change. Everyone may start off with the best of

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intentions, but we are all easily waylaid by the pressures of day-to-day life. It might help to put a checklist on the fridge to remind everyone of where they are at and what their responsibilities are. Or try scheduling a regular family meeting to review progress and help keep everyone involved and committed. This can also help spread the load, rather than making it all one person's responsibility.

- Do what the experts call 'cognitive restructuring'. Learn to identify, challenge and correct irrational thoughts. This means changing your 'self-talk', those silent conversations that go on in your head, so that they are positive rather than negative. Some examples of unhelpful and helpful ways of thinking include: 'I didn't go for a walk last night so I will never get fit (I didn't go for a walk last night but I can go for one tonight)'; 'I had a sausage roll for lunch so there's no point even trying any more (I had a sausage roll for lunch but tomorrow I will have a salad)'; 'I will never be able to get them to eat more vegetables (I will cook those vegetables a different way tomorrow and see if they will try them)'.
- Monitor the positives, not the negatives. Don't count how many days you couldn't drag yourself out of bed for a walk; count how many days you walked.
- Accept that change is rarely easy. Sometimes it requires discipline and sacrifice. But the more you can do to make it as easy as possible for everyone involved, the more likely you are to create lasting change.
- Pat yourself and your family on the back regularly. So many forces are working against your efforts to do the healthy thing. Taking a stand and starting to do things differently requires some courage and effort, and you deserve congratulations for it.

### Tip 5. Small steps take you further than a giant leap

When you've finally decided to embark on change, it's tempting to make grand plans. It's also risky. Starting off with dramatic changes can backfire; they can be harder to achieve, and if you don't succeed, it may put you off trying again.

So start with small and realistic goals. They are more likely to be sustainable, to become part of your daily routine. It might be something as simple as making one change to your shopping list, or parking your car one block away from the shopping centre, or adjusting a favourite recipe. Brushing your teeth straight after dinner might deter late-night snacking. Gradual changes to your family's eating habits are likely to lead to better long-term results than big changes made all at once, say the experts.<sup>28</sup>

Small changes may be all you need to correct energy imbalances anyway. Some experts estimate that most of the population's weight gain could be prevented by changing the energy balance by the equivalent of walking for 15 minutes every day or eating a few bites less at each meal.<sup>29</sup>

### Coaching for health

The psychological techniques that are used with sports and business people are also being used to help people improve their health and lifestyle. Here are a few pointers from some experts.

\* **Dr Suzy Green**, a coaching and clinical psychologist in Sydney, has worked with many individuals and families wanting to improve their diet and lifestyle.

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Psychological coaching is different from therapeutic counselling: it is performance-enhancing rather than healing. Coaching is based on setting goals and monitoring achievements. This might mean setting a goal of trying a new vegetable every week or hitting the pool at least a few times a week. It also requires constant evaluation—looking to see what is not working and making changes to goals and strategies accordingly.

Dr Green encourages clients to set positive rather than negative goals—wanting to be healthy, rather than trying to lose weight, for instance. She also encourages them to focus on the benefits of achieving the goals, rather than the costs. Coaching is not suitable for everyone, Dr Green says. If someone is battling depression or anxiety, therapeutic counselling is more appropriate; these people should consult their general practitioner, she says.

\* **Dr Tony Grant**, Director of the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney, says that understanding the difference between self-control and self-regulation is the key to making change.

People who rely on self-control to make change say things to themselves like ‘I should’ or ‘I must’. They are much more likely to achieve long-term change if they are capable of self-regulation—doing things they feel are the right things for them to do. He uses the following as an example.

The self-control approach: The chocolate is in the fridge. You think, *I should not eat it*. You walk away, willing yourself not to eat it and feeling deprived.

The self-regulation approach: As you walk away from the fridge you check how you feel about doing this. You feel really good about not having the chocolate.

Dr Grant says psychological coaching aims to help people shift from self-control to self-regulation by helping them get more in touch

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with their feelings and then using them in a constructive way. He calls this 'enhancing your emotional intelligence'.

Dr Grant has written a number of books about solution-focused coaching. Most are for business people, but many of the principles might be useful for families wanting to make change. Instead of dwelling on problems, he advises people to work on finding solutions. 'You may need to try several different solutions until you find the right one for you', he says.

Dr Grant also advises finding and using resources that can help you build solutions, and learning from previous situations where you found solutions to problems. 'By dwelling on the causes of problems we often perpetuate and exaggerate them,' he says. 'By looking for solutions we immediately shift the emphasis from the past to the future. If you start looking for solutions you start to find them.'

He also advises business chiefs to not expect employees to do something they wouldn't do themselves. Good managers know they will only win respect if they are prepared to do what they ask their staff to do. One could argue that it's the same with parents and children.

\* **Dr Janette Gale** is a health coach and psychologist who has worked with children, families and entire communities in the Shoalhaven area south of Sydney.

She has some tips for what NOT to do when working on change: don't tell people what to do without asking for their opinions, and don't scare people into action without offering them hope, for example.

Instead, Dr Gale recommends setting goals that are specific, measurable, attractive, realistic and time-framed. In other words, to borrow some psychological jargon, setting goals that are SMART.

She suggests asking the following questions of yourself or other family members:

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- What do you think you need to do in order to improve your health?
- If you were to do one thing to improve your health, what would it be?
- What could you do to make a small change in that direction?
- How would you feel about yourself if you were to do this?
- How different would your life be in one year from now?

She says fathers are often crucial in whether or not a family will be able to make change. 'If the father changes his behaviour, as well as the mother, the family will generally change,' she says. 'It is less likely if only the mother changes. Resistance from the father can undermine the whole process.'

A lot of Dr Gale's work involves helping women find ways to get their partners on board. Nagging is not helpful—it may make things worse. If women make the changes themselves, their partner will often follow. 'Some men need a lot of convincing,' says Dr Gale. 'They really want to know why change is needed. If they are not nagged, their resistance may dilute over time. They might even start to realise they are being stubborn and pig-headed. You need to figure out what will work in individual families.'

Dr Gale also recommends persistence. 'If at first you don't succeed, try again—but try a different strategy,' she says.

## Making healthy choices the easy choices

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Water will always take the easiest course down a hill. Humans are a bit the same; we tend to take the easiest option, even if it is going to mean that we eventually take a tumble over the waterfall. Maybe that goes

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back to the days when it was an evolutionary advantage to conserve energy.

That's why the mantra in health circles is that if people want to make lasting changes in their lives, the environment needs to support them by making healthy choices the easy choices. One of the most obvious successes of this approach has been in the field of smoking. It involved changing the environment to make it easier for smokers to quit—and more difficult for them to keep smoking—and included things such as introducing smoke-free workplaces and increasing the taxes on cigarettes.

My own experience with the power of such an approach began with the arrival in my letterbox of an advertisement for a new local business. For a modest sum, a large box of fresh fruit and vegetables would be delivered direct from the markets to my door each week.

It sounds such a simple thing, but it's had a huge impact. We are eating far more fruit and vegetables than before, just to work through our box before the next delivery. As a result, we are spending less (time and money) at the supermarket, and there is less room on our plates for processed foods. Where once we snacked on cheese and biscuits between meals, we are now much more likely to munch on fruit.

The best thing is that we are enjoying our meals more than ever. The produce is deliciously fresh and lasts much longer than the stuff we used to buy at the shops. One of the attractions is that we never know what will be in the box each week. It is always a surprise, and has encouraged us to try new recipes and ways of cooking.

It may just be a coincidence, but we now have more energy, and the fit of our clothes suggests that a few excess kilograms might have gone by the wayside, without any conscious effort on our part.

## **Parenting tips: Who's the boss?**

Parents need knowledge, skills and confidence to bring up children. But many find themselves in one of the most important and challenging roles of their life with little preparation—and of course no training. They may end up relying on instinct or memories from their own childhood. Or the opposite: they may find themselves completely overwhelmed by a flood of well-meaning but sometimes conflicting and unhelpful advice.

Many experts believe that helping mothers and fathers improve their parenting skills is one of the keys to improving children's health and wellbeing.

Many organisations have a ton of information and practical advice to help you negotiate the parenting minefield (see the section in the Appendices, Further Resources, for their details). In the meantime, here are a few tips:

- Learn a little about the stages of child development. For example, don't try to negotiate with a 3-year-old; they are not little adults. They need you to set limits and boundaries. On the other hand, that authoritative approach may well backfire with teenagers.
- Be prepared to put in the hard yards, even though it's often easier to give in to a child who is whining for lollies, and to switch on the TV instead of supervising your kids at the park.
- Be consistent and clear, both in what you expect of your children and how you behave yourself.
- Learn to say no. Mean it when you say it. Don't be budged, or the word will lose its power.
- Develop ground rules for the whole family: no pestering in the supermarket, for example, or no TV while it's still light outside.

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- Speak to children the way you would like to be spoken to. Behave the way you would like them to behave.
- Nurture your children's self-esteem and confidence. Many children have low self-esteem—it is not limited to those with weight problems. A recent study of Victorian children found 15 per cent of children of normal weight had low self-esteem. The rate was much higher in those who were overweight or obese (25 per cent and 47 per cent respectively). But roughly two-thirds of children with low self-esteem were not overweight or obese.<sup>30</sup>
- Encourage everyone in the family to adopt a positive, problem-solving approach rather than a blaming and shaming approach.
- Everyone makes mistakes. Don't even think about trying to be the super parent. Notice the small steps forward that you are all making and pat yourself on the back for them. If you are stressed, anxious or tired, parenting will be more difficult. Take some time out for yourself regularly.

Dr Michael Carr-Gregg says the single most important thing parents can do is to stay emotionally in touch with their child. 'Keep on knocking on their emotional door,' he says. 'Fight over things that matter, not an untidy room. No kid ever died of an untidy room. Know where your kids are. Take an interest in their lives. Don't allow them to push you away.'

...and some general tips, from the Triple P Positive Parenting Program at the University of Queensland:<sup>31</sup>

- When your child wants to show you something, stop what you are doing and pay attention to your child. It is important to spend frequent, small amounts of time with your child doing things that you both enjoy.

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- Give your child lots of physical affection—children often like hugs, cuddles and holding hands.
- Give your child lots of descriptive praise when they do something that you would like to see more of, such as, ‘Thank you for doing what I asked straight away.’
- Teach your child new skills by first showing the skill yourself, then giving your child opportunities to learn the new skill. For example, speak politely to each other in the home. Then prompt your child to speak politely, saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, for instance, and praise your child for their efforts.

### Discipline versus punishment

Everyone can benefit from a little discipline. It is essential for children’s wellbeing as they grow up and it helps make the job of parenting less stressful and more successful. Children need to know what is expected of them—and the consequences of breaking the rules.

The Australian Childhood Foundation draws a clear distinction between discipline and punishment.<sup>32</sup> Discipline comes from the Latin word ‘to teach’, whereas punishment is reactive and focused on penalising unacceptable behaviour. Children rarely learn correct or acceptable behaviour through punishment.

#### *Why is discipline important?*

Children need discipline to feel safe and secure while they are learning about themselves and their world. It helps them take responsibility for their own behaviour by teaching them acceptable ways to respond to situations. As they grow, children become more self-disciplined. They understand how to behave and can control their behaviour

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themselves. Self-discipline develops through adults teaching and nurturing children's confidence. Successful discipline relies on a good relationship between you and your child and builds on your child's wish to please you. Successful discipline involves understanding the rules and what happens when rules are broken.

### *What about physical punishment?*

Effective discipline can be achieved without using physical punishment. Physical punishment causes pain and does not communicate care or respect to a child. It can undermine a child's sense of love and security, and can lead to them becoming anxious, fearful or rebellious. Physical punishment teaches children that violence can be an acceptable way to solve problems. Hitting a child does not teach acceptable ways to behave. Instead it may result in a repeat of the misbehaviour. Often children are so upset or angry after being hit that they forget why they are being punished.

And the same goes for parents. Taking steps to improve your own and your family's health and lifestyle will require some self-discipline; punishing yourself won't help anyone.

## 6. The big turn-off

The travel writer Bill Bryson is responsible for one of my favourite quips about television. The best thing that can be said about Norwegian television, he once wrote, is 'that it gives you the sensation of a coma without the worry and inconvenience'. But it seems a tad unfair to single out Norway, given that the television-induced couch potato is such a universal phenomenon.

Eighty-odd years ago, when a Scottish inventor called John Logie Baird gave the public its first taste of television, few could have guessed how great its impact would be. Television surely has become one of the most powerful cultural and commercial forces in the modern world. It influences everything from global and national politics to the conduct of individuals' and families' lives. It has been estimated that by the time we turn 75, many people will have spent more than 12.5 years of 24 hour days doing nothing but watching TV, and that many children now have more eye contact with television characters than with their own parents.<sup>1</sup> By age 18, the average child has spent more time watching television (14,000 hours) than attending school (12,000 hours).<sup>2</sup>

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Television has become such a constant in our lives that its presence is mostly taken for granted and its impact is often unquestioned. Yet there is more and more evidence that the box which has come to dominate most lounge rooms—and many kitchens and bedrooms, as well—is not a benign force, especially when it comes to young children. Many parents are happy for their children to switch on the television, because they think it is safer than many other activities. But TV, dubbed ‘the other parent’ by some researchers, is not the trustworthy babysitter that many parents assume.

Sure, it is convenient and almost guaranteed as an effective method for calming children’s natural exuberance, occupying their attention or confining them indoors. But it also brings some significant health risks. One medical review concluded that television viewing affects children and adolescents’ behaviour, academic performance, body image, nutrition and substance abuse, amongst other things.<sup>3</sup> In April 2006, a special issue of the American medical journal *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* was devoted to exploring the impact of television and other media on the health of children and adolescents. ‘Given the enormous influence that electronic media in all of their forms exerts on the lives of children, it is astonishing how little parents, researchers and policymakers have been spurred to action’, commented an editorial in the journal.<sup>4</sup>

Weight gain is one of the most obvious risks of a television diet. Watching television affects both energy intake (by increasing the likelihood of snacking), and energy expenditure (by discouraging activity). Many scientific reviews have concluded that there is frustratingly little evidence about what interventions would be most effective at preventing rising

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levels of childhood obesity.<sup>5</sup> The epidemic is new, so there are no long-term studies that could provide such answers. But the one thing that most experts agree upon is this: television is a key culprit and regulating the time children spend in front of screens is one of the most important measures families can take to promote their children's health. Some studies have shown that rewarding children for not watching TV or engaging in other such sedentary activities is more effective at promoting weight loss than rewarding their involvement in exercise or sport. Many children who are encouraged to reduce their inactivity end up liking exercise more than those who are put into regimented exercise programs.<sup>6</sup>

Of course television is only one of an ever-increasing array of media technologies which are dramatically altering the way children spend their spare time—compared with previous generations. And it is likely that computer and other screen-based games, the internet, and interactive mobile phones represent only the beginning of the technological transformation of childhood.

This chapter examines how a screen-based diet affects children, and also gives some tips for regulating their exposure to television and related activities.

## **Reality TV**

**What is recommended:**

- Medical experts recommend that children under 2 should watch no television at all because of its potential to harm their development. Older children should watch no more than 1–2 hours per day of quality screen time.<sup>7</sup>

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### What happens:

- Australian children begin watching TV from an early age: 4-month-olds watch an average of 44 minutes a day, building to an average of 2.5 hours by the time they are 4 years old.<sup>8</sup>
- When parents were asked to record their children's activities in a diary, the results showed that 45 per cent of infants watched TV, a video or a DVD for a mean of 1.4 hours on the day of the diary recording.<sup>9</sup> About 90 per cent of 4 to 5-year-old children watched TV, a video or a DVD for an average of 2.3 hours. This was more time than was spent walking, running or doing other exercise. About a quarter of these children also used a computer or computer games for a mean of 1.1 hours per day.
- According to a Victorian study, boys of primary school age watch an average of 15.7 hours of television a week, and girls an average of 14.8 hours.<sup>10</sup>
- TV ratings surveys show that Australians watch an average of 3.5 hours of television per day, with 5 to 12-year-olds watching about 2½ hours, and 13 to 17 year olds watching about 2 hours 40 minutes. Adults in the typical parental age range (25 to 34) watch more than 3 hours per day on average.<sup>11</sup>
- A 1999 survey found that 14 per cent of boys and girls watch at least 5 hours of television a day, and another 34 per cent watch 3–4 hours.<sup>12</sup>
- In Western Australia, a study found that only 4 per cent of boys of primary and high school age met the recommendations for time spent in front of a screen—no more than 2 hours per day. Almost a third of primary school girls said they preferred to watch TV or play electronic games than do physical activity.<sup>13</sup>
- A large NSW study conducted in 2004 found that 80 per cent of high school boys in cities and 64 per cent of those from rural areas spent more than two hours each day in front of a TV or computer

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screen. So did 66 per cent of high school girls from cities and 57 per cent of those from rural areas.<sup>14</sup>

### What is recommended:

- Families should have firm guidelines on time in front of the TV and on other screen-based technologies. Parents should also monitor children's viewing and use of media technologies.

### What happens:

- About 40 per cent of parents in households with TV had no rules about what children watched or how long they watched, according to a study conducted in the Barwon area in southwestern Victoria.<sup>15</sup>
- A great deal of children's TV viewing and use of media technologies goes unmonitored by parents. Parents often do not know the details of their children's activities on the internet (including in chat rooms).<sup>16</sup>

### What is recommended:

- Children should not have a TV, or access to other screen-based forms of entertainment, in their bedroom—it increases the likelihood of excess viewing and weight gain, and reduces parental control.

### What happens:

- Nineteen per cent of children lived in a family where there was a TV in one or more of the children's bedrooms, according to the Barwon area study.<sup>17</sup> Another study found that more than a third of older children had a TV in their bedrooms.<sup>18</sup>

### What is recommended:

- Switch the television off during mealtimes and don't eat in front of it. People are more likely to eat too much and to have unhealthy eating patterns if they eat in front of the TV.

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### What happens:

- Forty-one per cent of families eat their evening meal in front of the TV every night, according to the Barwon area study.<sup>19</sup> In a study of Victorian families, a third reported watching TV while eating the evening meal more than 4 times a week. A further 22 per cent reported doing so 1 to 3 times a week.<sup>20</sup>
- Almost 40 per cent of teenagers reported eating dinner in front of the TV at least 4 nights a week.<sup>21</sup>

## Potential harms of TV

Don't get me wrong: television and other screen-based technologies have the potential for good. They entertain, inform and help connect us to people and parts of the world we may otherwise never have known. Screen literacy has become a vital skill and is an important aspect of children's social and intellectual development. It will become ever more important as media technologies become more diverse and sophisticated. One study found that children who watched educational television programs in preschool performed better in school when they were teenagers.<sup>22</sup> Studies suggest that selective television viewing can help academic performance, and that video games involving information, academic content and problem-solving can boost children's learning.<sup>23</sup> One video game has even been credited with improving children's diets; players, who were rewarded in the game for tasks related to fruit and vegetables, were more likely to eat more fruit and vegies in the real world than children who did not use the game.<sup>24</sup> Researchers who find apparently conflicting study results—that exposure to media makes children both more aggressive and more socially skilled—say these findings

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reflect differences in what children watch and the time spent in media use.<sup>25</sup>

And it's not all about the kids. Television can also be a sanity-saving tool for parents in desperate need of some quiet time away from children's demands. Even Associate Professor Tim Olds, an expert on child fitness at the University of South Australia, acknowledges just how convenient television can be for parents. 'If it weren't for *Thomas the Tank Engine*, I don't think my wife and I would have had sex in the first five years of having children,' he jokes.

But there are also some downsides:

### 1. Impact on activity and weight

Many studies have shown that children who watch lots of TV are also more likely to eat poorly and to be overweight. The fattening effects of a TV diet are evident even in preschoolers.<sup>26</sup> One Australian study also found that children who watch lots of television are less likely to participate in organised physical activity.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, overweight children are less likely to succeed in shedding weight if they spend a lot of time in front of the TV.<sup>28</sup> Reducing children's television time is one of *the* most effective weight-busting strategies. At least two studies have shown that reducing children's time in front of television leads to weight loss.<sup>29</sup> Some experts argue that reducing children's time in front of screens may be more effective for weight control than encouraging children to play sport and get involved in other physical activity.<sup>30</sup>

Many explanations have been suggested for why television is so fattening. Here are some:

- There is less time available for physical activity. This is the suggestion of one study showing that teenage boys who

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watch TV for less than 2 hours a day are far more likely to be fit than those who watch it for more than 4 hours a day.<sup>31</sup>

- Children who spend hours glued to the box fall into sedentary habits. They become used to lounging around rather than being active. This may help explain the findings of one study in which scientists were asked to identify people from an analysis of their daily activity patterns. When shown the activity patterns of Scottish children aged 3 to 5, they wrongly picked them as desk-bound office workers.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that children are becoming so sedentary that they are growing old before their time.

- There is some evidence that watching TV burns less energy than other sedentary pursuits. One study of children aged 8 to 12 found that their metabolic rates were lower when watching TV than when they were resting or sleeping. However, other studies have not shown such an effect.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, perhaps Bill Bryson's coma joke was not so far off the mark after all.

- Television viewing may be a marker of a lifestyle that promotes weight gain in a number of ways. In other words, children who watch a lot of television may also be more likely to have parents who are not particularly health conscious or who do not have the knowledge and skills to promote a healthier lifestyle.

- Eating in front of the television is likely to lead to overeating for a number of reasons. It may distract people's attention from the internal cues that tell them they've had enough to eat.<sup>34</sup> Children who watch a lot of television are also more likely to have poor quality or insufficient sleep, which can also contribute to disordered eating patterns. There is also the Pavlov's dog issue: people who are in the

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habit of snacking in front of the television are likely to crave something to eat as soon as the screen lights up.

However, one of the main reasons that television is so fattening is because it continuously bombards us with advertisements for foods, and usually foods that are high in fat and/or sugar. Many studies have shown that children who watch more TV are also more likely to consume fast food, energy-dense snacks and soft drinks, and are less likely to eat fruit and vegetables.<sup>35</sup> It is surely no coincidence that this pattern also reflects the content of television food advertising.

Many studies have shown that advertising is effective in influencing children's beliefs, preferences, purchasing behaviour and consumption patterns. It also contributes to their misconceptions about food; research has shown that many young children are convinced that fast foods and other heavily promoted junk foods are nutritious.<sup>36</sup>

It is not only the on-screen advertisements that encourage unhealthy eating. Films do the same, according to one study.<sup>37</sup> Researchers analysed the portrayal of nutrition and exercise in the 10 top-grossing films in America in each year from 1991 to 2000. Foods high in fats and sugars featured heavily, but fruit, vegetables and dairy products were seldom shown. The branded goods most often shown were soft drink, beer, confectionery, chips and pretzels, and alcohol. The researchers noted the common practice of companies paying to place their products in movies. Another US study found that alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs feature widely in prime time TV drama, movies and music videos.

The cruel irony is that while TV is encouraging unhealthy lifestyles and weight gain, it is also promoting unrealistic

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beliefs and perceptions about body image. The people who inhabit TV-land tend to be thinner and more beautiful than those in the real world. Television characters who are overweight or obese are often portrayed as unattractive, unpopular or unsuccessful.

So the TV diet puts young people in an impossible position. It tells them they must be thin to be loved and successful, but at the same time it makes it more difficult for them to achieve a healthy weight. At least one study has linked television to the creation of eating disorders. Before television was introduced to Fiji, eating disorders in young women were unknown. Three years after TV arrived, dieting and vomiting to control weight had become relatively common.<sup>38</sup>

### What the research shows

In 2005, researchers from the NSW Cancer Council spent long hours analysing the content of food advertisements screened during 672 hours of television viewing time. The footage was shown by Channels 9, 7 and 10 in Brisbane, Sydney, the NSW town of Tamworth and Ballarat in Victoria.

A quarter (25 per cent) of all advertisements were for unhealthy foods, while just 6 per cent were for healthy foods. The advertisements for unhealthy foods peaked during times and programs when children were more likely to be watching. Fast foods and takeaways accounted for the biggest proportion of advertisements for unhealthy foods, followed by confectionery, chocolates, snack foods and sweetened breakfast cereals.

According to Ms Kathy Chapman, a senior policy officer and nutritionist at the Cancer Council, the study's preliminary results

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suggest that if children watch an average of 2 hours of commercial television a day, they see about 11 advertisements for unhealthy foods. 'The big implication is that food advertising really is contributing to the obesogenic environment', says Ms Chapman. 'When children are sitting down to watch TV, they are not seeing ads that reflect the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating. Instead, unhealthy eating is being normalised.'

When the Australian Division of General Practice did an audit of advertising during children's programs in the January 2003 holidays, they found that:

- children received no 'healthy eating' messages;
- there was an average of one food advertisement per break (sometimes three); and
- over 99 per cent of food advertisements were for junk food.

If children watched an average of 2½ hours of television per day during their summer holidays, the researchers estimated they would have seen more than 400 junk food advertisements, lasting almost 3½ hours.<sup>39</sup>

Children also are influenced by TV advertising directed at adults. One study by a media buying agency reportedly showed that advertisers do not need to advertise in children's time slots to have them take notice. Carlton Draught and Hahn Premium Light beers ranked among the most popular TV ads with children aged 8 to 14.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, other research by the NSW Cancer Council shows that point-of-sale promotions in supermarkets, using cartoon characters, competitions and other such marketing gimmicks, are used mainly to sell unhealthy foods. That study found that 94 per cent of those promotions involved unhealthy foods, while just 6 per cent were for healthy foods.

## **2. Impact on growth, development and learning**

Infants and young children need interaction with other people to help them develop relationship skills, language, and social skills. Television can interfere with this development, according to the advocacy group Young Media Australia:

The infant who has learned that he can engage his parent in play and make objects do what he wants them to do acquires a fundamental belief in his ability to affect the world around him...Television is not capable of collaborative communication—where verbal and non-verbal signals are directly responded to by the other and which help infants develop healthy, secure attachments and the ability to self-regulate emotional and behavioural responses. This means TV is a very poor babysitter for infants and can hinder rather than help their most important developmental task, of attaching to their primary care giver.

Infants learn that if I am hungry and cry, Mum will usually pick me up and feed me. Visual media does not respond to an infant's expression of their needs. Attempts to elicit emotional responses from a TV or computer will fail and can be very confusing for infants and very young children. Infants need to be able to indicate when they are tired and want to rest from further interactions. TV is intrusive and can overload neural circuitry. The infant can't switch off the images and rest when they have had enough.<sup>41</sup>

Parents' and carers' TV viewing may also be an issue. If you are regularly absorbed in a program while feeding or playing with

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your baby, you may miss emotional cues that need your response. If the program is disturbing or upsetting, the infant may pick up on your distress. Listening to music may be a more relaxing option, according to Young Media Australia. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians cites research showing that having the TV on in the background has a detrimental effect on children's play: infants and toddlers spent less time playing with toys and had a shorter attention span when the television was on.<sup>42</sup>

The possibility has been raised that television viewing may interfere with children's neurological development. Some researchers believe that banning all screen time during the formative years of brain development may reduce children's subsequent risk of developing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). However, this issue is controversial, and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians says there is no evidence to support a link between TV viewing and ADHD. One study which followed children for 26 years from birth found that those who had watched a lot of television in childhood and adolescence had poorer educational achievement.<sup>43</sup> The researchers concluded that excessive television viewing early in life 'may have long-lasting adverse consequences for educational achievement and socio-economic status and wellbeing'. However, such a study may also reflect that children who watch a lot of television are disadvantaged in other areas of their lives as well.

### **3. Impact on behaviour**

If television simply reflected the real world, it would be a lot more boring—and less watched—than it is. Television news and general programming competes for our attention by

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providing viewing which is sensational, compelling, and far removed from the reality that most of us experience. Even so-called reality programming is engineered to be nothing like the daily humdrum that most of us know.

Young children, however, do not understand that what is shown on TV is a skewed picture. They cannot be expected to know that the behaviours and attitudes they see on the screen are not necessarily appropriate for the real world. One can only speculate how reality television shows such as *Big Brother* would have been perceived by those who drafted Australia's first television code in 1956, which stated that children's programs should impart a real appreciation of the spiritual values and of courage, honour and integrity. The code also specified that programming should respect the sanctity of marriage, and that heroes, heroines and other sympathetic characters must be portrayed as intelligent and morally courageous.<sup>44</sup>

One of the most disturbing lessons that TV-land teaches children today is that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with conflict. The content of programming has changed dramatically since television was launched in Australia in 1956. It has been estimated that by the time they turn 18, the average child in the United States has witnessed 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence on TV.<sup>45</sup> And that does not include all the shooting, fighting and killing they see on computer games. Many children's health experts are concerned about the impact of such exposure to violence. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians says there is now 'compelling' evidence that it does harm, with potential long-lasting effects.<sup>46</sup>

In the United States, a coalition of leading health organisations issued a joint statement concluding that media violence makes children more likely to:

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- become emotionally desensitised to violence;
- avoid taking action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs;
- believe that violence is inevitable;
- believe that violence is an acceptable way of solving conflict;
- believe that the world is a violent place (which leads to greater anxiety, self-protective behaviours and mistrust of others); and
- use violence themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Parents and teachers are only too familiar with examples of children mimicking bad behaviour they have seen on TV or computer games. Even Hollywood executives believe there is a link between television violence and the real thing.<sup>48</sup> Some researchers argue that if television had never been invented, violent crime would be half as common as it is.<sup>49</sup> Media technology also exposes children to other undesirable behaviours. A US study found that about a fifth of children who use the internet regularly had been approached, usually in chat rooms, for sexual contact. The children in the study were aged 10 to 17. Most did not tell their parents about such approaches.<sup>50</sup>

Media content can make children frightened and anxious about the world, but this can also be a chicken-and-egg issue. Some children may turn to TV or other media technologies as a way of escaping difficult family environments, depression or other stresses. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians cites research showing that the more TV a family watches, the less likely family members are to communicate with each other, which of course means the family has fewer opportunities to solve any problems.<sup>51</sup>

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### ...and some more reasons to switch off

- The easiest way to get children active is to switch off the TV. Often just doing that is enough to encourage them to start playing. Even if they turn to other sedentary pursuits, such as reading, they will probably burn off more energy than if they had stayed stuck to the screen,<sup>52</sup>
- The fewer food advertisements your children see, the less pestering you will get; and
- In a randomised controlled trial conducted in the United States, children at one primary school reduced the amount of time they spent in front of TV, video and video games. They were encouraged to have a 10 day turn-off with no screen time at all, and then to limit TV time to 7 hours per week. At the end of 6 months, children at this school had cut their average screen time from nearly 30 hours a week to 20 hours. They also gained half as much weight as children at another school where there had been no such intervention.<sup>53</sup>

## How to switch off

The first and most important step is to think about the role of television and other screen-based entertainment in your family. Parents who understand that media exposure can have harmful effects on children are more likely to take steps to regulate their family's viewing. So the fact that you are even reading this chapter is a hugely important first step in the right direction. Here are some other possible steps:

### 1. Set rules

Work out some household rules about the use of television and other screen-related activities. The earlier you introduce these, the easier it will be for everyone. The following ideas have been

## The big turn-off

helpful for some families, but remember, what works for other households might be different from what works for yours:

- Set some screen-free times. Mealtimes and homework times are crucial periods when the television and other screens should be off unless, of course, the computer is needed for homework purposes. Children often sleep better if they have a screen-free, quiet period just before bedtime. Some families have a no-screen rule during the school week, or before school, or on weekends when the sun is shining. Or declare at least one day a week 'technology free'—no TV, no videos, no DVDs, no computer games and no internet, unless it's really needed for homework. Set realistic limits: some parents will find it easiest to go 'cold turkey' with these rules, but others think it's more effective to introduce them one at a time. Setting a family TV Challenge or making a family pledge to reduce viewing time may help provide some motivation and goals.

The main point is to create an environment where the television is not automatically switched on, or left on continuously. Establish the habit in your children of asking for permission to switch on the TV or computer. Screen time should be a privilege, not a right.

Discuss the benefits of having this sort of household policy. Talk about how it might help different people in the household in different ways. There might be more time for family activities, for conversation, for games. Children might find they feel fresher in the mornings or have more energy for school or for playing. Parents might feel less stressed or cranky if everyone has more time to help with household chores. Try to involve everyone in discussing and developing your household's approach to screen time. Encourage older

## The big fat conspiracy

children to be aware of the issues for younger children, and to take some responsibility for them. Work out strategies together for resolving arguments about screen time.

- Be especially tough on commercial television. Young Media Australia advises not letting preschoolers watch any commercial television at all. Before age 7 or 8, children cannot understand the intention of advertising, which means they are particularly vulnerable to it. They don't know that what looks good to eat might not be good for them. When they get older, teach them to hit the 'mute' button during ad breaks. Advertising often relies on making people feel inferior if they do not have a certain product, and this can make young children feel insecure and anxious, says Barbara Biggins, of Young Media Australia. She recommends that parents start talking to their children about what advertisers are trying to do when the children are 6 or 7. Instead of watching commercial TV, borrow or rent videos and DVDs.

- Plan your week's viewing. Look at the television program and plan what to watch. Make it a conscious decision to turn on the television for selected shows and then to turn it off afterwards. Some researchers have called this 'intelligent viewing' rather than 'vegetative viewing'.<sup>54</sup> Or tape the programs you want to see so you can watch them together as a family. Decide, together, before anything gets switched on how long the child can have on the computer or in front of the television. Try to restrict viewing to short blocks of time. The longer children are transfixed, the more difficult it is to drag them away.

- Don't allow snacking or eating in front of the TV. If children want a snack, get them into the habit of turning off the television and having it in another room.

## **2. Walk the walk**

Many parents complain about how much time their children spend in front of screens, even though they spend long hours in front of the box themselves. Be conscious of your own screen habits. Don't expect the children to do anything you are not prepared to do yourself.

## **3. Talk the talk**

Know what your children are watching on TV or doing on the computer. Talk about the programs or games and the goals of advertisers, and help your children develop skills in critical thinking. Explain the different types of programs—news stories, dramas, documentaries, for example—and what this means in terms of how viewers should think about them. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians recommends that you discuss with your children the techniques being used by advertisers. You could also try turning off the sound during ads.

Don't just listen to what your children say about a program; look at their body language and be aware of the impact of different programs on their mood. Barbara Biggins says that parents can only be effective media educators if the television and other media are kept in a public space where parents can stay in touch with their children's viewing and activities. 'Parents need to choose their children's media experience as carefully as they choose their education and food,' says Biggins.

## **4. Encourage awareness**

Encourage children to monitor how much time they spend watching TV or playing on the computer. Dr Kylie Ball, an academic at Deakin University in Victoria who has used this approach in research, thinks it can be useful for children from

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about the age of 10. Some families find it helpful to keep a diary of screen time in a prominent position, such as on the fridge. Often children and parents are surprised by how much time they spend in front of the screen—this on its own can help lead to a change in habits.

### **5. Rewarding behaviour**

Don't use TV as a reward. Find healthier alternatives, such as spending some time together, visiting the park, playing a new game or reading a book.

### **6. Be consistent**

Don't give into the grizzles (whenever humanly possible!). Enforce the rules that the family has agreed on and don't make exceptions. When you say no, stick to it. Many children will be happy to play or do something else once they've had their whinge about the TV or computer being switched off. Weather the storm and enjoy the calm that follows.

### **7. Do your sums**

How many TVs or computers or video games does your household really need? The more you have, the more they will be used. Think about reducing or limiting the number of screens in your home.

### **8. Play on**

Television can become a habit. If your household is used to having the TV on all the time, develop a substitute habit—put on the radio or CDs instead. Encourage the kids to dance along.

Try to create a family habit of quiet activities that do not involve TV, such as reading, drawing or writing. Improve

## **The big turn-off**

everyone's skills in listening to stories, whether it's through reading to each other or listening to a tape or CD.

Support your children if they show an interest in hobbies. Don't worry if they complain about being bored. According to television critic Aric Sigman, boredom is one of the greatest gifts parents can give children—it does good things for their imagination, resourcefulness and intellectual and creative development. Children need time to read, write, explore, build, create, and fantasise, he says.

Don't feel that you have to always organise their games or play. Encourage children to be independent in their play from an early age. Take an interest in what they are doing and set aside time to play with them, but let them lead the way. 'I see young parents today wearing themselves out trying to entertain their children and keep them from being bored,' says Ellyn Satter. 'Don't do that. Let your child be bored. If he gets bored enough, he will think up something creative and wonderful to do.'<sup>55</sup>

## **9. Active alternatives**

When appealing alternatives are on offer, children are often happy to switch off the TV. They may even do it without being asked.

'This generation of children will choose physical activity if it's packaged in a way that is more attractive than the sedentary alternative,' says Dr Jim Dollman, a researcher at the University of South Australia who was involved in a study which showed exactly that. When children aged 6 to 13 in an after school care service in Adelaide were offered a chance to participate in a range of non-competitive, inclusive games, many left the TV room to go and play. 'These kids do not innately resist physical activity,' Dr Dollman says. 'It's not a question of laziness. We

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need to get that out of the rhetoric. It's about them having a wider menu of choice for their leisure activity. Physical activity has to market itself in a way that competes for their leisure time. It's all a question of access and enjoyment.'

### **10. Out of sight**

You know what they say about out of sight, out of mind? Keep the TV in a cupboard so that it is not constantly on view. Only allow it out during agreed viewing hours. Or hide it under an attractive cloth. Same with the computer and associated games.

Or put it out of sight—permanently. Families who have gone cold turkey often say they now have so much more time for talking, reading and doing things together.

### **11. Whatever works**

Public health researcher Julie Leask is fed up with being warned about the perils of TV. Sometimes it's the only thing that gets her through those crazy times of the day when she is trying to juggle chores with the demands of two young children. She flicks it on to occupy them when she needs a few minutes to herself in the morning to have a shower or when she is trying to make dinner. 'It mesmerises them,' she says. 'It works incredibly well to take the pressure off me so I can get a few things done. I feel terribly guilty about it but I am not sure what else I can do when I don't have friends, family or husband around at the time when I need the space.'

Julie's solution is to restrict her children's screen time to those critical times of the day when it's a sanity saviour. Other households work it differently—it depends on their needs.

The point is to figure out what works for you. And throw away the guilt.

## **The TV-free diet**

Soon after we begin chatting, Dr Annette Katelaris excuses herself briefly to deal with the background noise. 'Turn the volume down,' she instructs her kids, before returning to the telephone.

If you didn't know better, you might assume Annette wants the TV volume to be lowered. In fact, she is just asking her children to speak more quietly. Her household must be one of the few in Sydney, if not Australia, that doesn't have a TV.

Annette and her husband Dr John Downie are both doctors, but health concerns are not their main reason for choosing to be TV-free. They are so busy with work and family demands that they want to make the most of the family time they have. 'To me, time spent goggle-eyed in front of the TV is time not doing anything else,' says Annette.

She has noticed many benefits to their TV policy. Their three children—two teenage girls and an 8-year-old boy—are keen readers and have more time for active leisure pursuits, including music lessons. They are not as influenced by commercial trends and pressures as some of their peers, and their teachers report that they tend to think 'out of the box'—literally. They tend to be lateral and critical thinkers who have not been brainwashed by the worldview and values promoted on many TV shows.

Annette says the lack of a TV also helps family members engage with each other rather than just vegging out in front of the screen. On holidays, if there's a TV, the family dynamics change noticeably. 'When they've been sitting in front of the telly, they can get really irritable and cranky,' she says.

It isn't always easy to take a different road from the majority. Annette knows her children sometimes feel under pressure from friends, and left out of schoolyard conversations. They have sometimes longed for a TV.

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As well, Annette often receives well-meaning offers of a TV from relatives and friends who cannot imagine why anyone would choose to be without one. She has no problem declining such offers, and says other families shouldn't be scared to try the TV-free life. 'They should relish the time they can spend doing other things,' she says. 'For our family it's been a very positive choice.'

### Reality check: some questions to ask yourself<sup>56</sup>

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- Do your children have a TV/computer with internet access in their bedrooms? If so, how do you monitor how they use this?
- Do you know what they are watching/using? Who decides what your child watches? Do you watch programs with them?
- Do you make rules and stick to them?
- How many hours does your child spend with the TV, video games or the internet? On weekdays? On the weekend?
- How much time are they spending being physically active?
- Have you talked about internet safety with them?

### An insider's view

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Gillian Hehir has a better idea than most parents of the techniques used in advertising and marketing to young people. Many years ago, and much to her regret now, she helped a tobacco company market cigarettes to teenage girls.

Now a marketing lecturer at the University of Ballarat in Victoria, Gillian has tried to bring up her son, 12-year-old Stuart, to be aware of advertisers' ploys.

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She tells him about why they use celebrities to sell their products (because it works) and how breakfast cereals are often associated with sports stars and fitness despite sometimes being of dubious nutritional value. Gillian also encourages Stuart to study food labels while they are shopping, and to be aware of how a well-balanced diet will help him enjoy his sport even more.

Even so, she has seen him fall under the sway of marketers. 'I certainly talk to him about TV advertising, but even with that I find that he is influenced by what he sees on TV,' she says. 'When something new comes out, he wants to try it. I have the most problems with breakfast cereals.'

Gillian says her task has become even more difficult thanks to cross-promotion on the internet. Stuart often wants to buy products so he can link into online competitions and games.

She is a realist, so she can't imagine that companies will stop targeting children unless they are forced to do so. In a world where it is virtually impossible to shield children from advertising, Gillian believes the best option is to educate children to be critical consumers. 'There needs to be a degree of parental responsibility,' she says, 'not just in what children watch on TV, but also in how parents talk to them about it.'



**Breakfast serial**

### Listen to the experts

Teresa Orange and Louise O'Flynn are experts at using the media to influence behaviour. Teresa, a psychologist, has worked on campaigns targeting children for one of the world's largest advertising companies, and Louisa once promoted the United Kingdom's biggest consumer brand, the National Lottery. But these British women began to look at the media with new eyes when they became mothers and started worrying about how much time their children were spending in front of screens. The more they investigated the issue, the more concerned they became.

The result is a book, *The media diet for kids: a parent's survival guide to TV & computer games*, which gives parents some strategies for reducing their children's dependence on screen-based entertainment. The authors interviewed a stack of experts, parents and children as part of their research. Some of the most interesting tips came from children themselves.

Many children felt that too much screen time was a bad thing and looked to their parents to provide some guidance. 'If you don't get told to come off, it's hard to know when to come off,' said one 11-year-old boy.

Most children thought their parents were far too weak. 'They say no and don't mean it' was a frequent comment. When they became parents, these children said, they would be stricter than their parents had been. They said they would be upset, guilty, annoyed and cross if their own children ended up being media bingers.

Many children had become skilled at negating the parental switch-off. 'I just keep on going, "Please can I go on the computer" every five minutes, until she gives up,' said a 9-year-old boy.

## **Flex your muscles**

Parents often underestimate their power. Anyone who has ever worked in a politician's office, the bureaucracy or the corporate sector can vouch for the impact of a well-timed and carefully worded letter, phone call or email.

For parents with the time and energy to get involved in advocacy around media issues, there are many opportunities. Here are a few which might be of interest:

### **1. Coalition on Food Advertising to Children**

A number of leading health, medical and consumer groups formed the Coalition in 2002 to press policy makers and governments to ban food advertising to children. The Coalition's chair, Kaye Mehta, a lecturer in the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at Flinders University in Adelaide, says Sweden bans all advertising, including advertising for food, to children under 12, and Quebec bans food advertising to children. The Coalition lobbies governments and trains parents to become advocates. 'You don't bring about change just through health experts lobbying,' says Mehta.

For more information, go to <http://www.chdf.org.au>.

## **Popping some myths**

Dietitian Paul Jones discovered that the now-infamous Coco Pops ad, featuring ABC TV's *Playschool* presenter Monica Trapaga, was effective even before he'd had a chance to see it. This soon became apparent when he arrived at a primary school in the southeast Queensland town of Warwick, to give a talk on nutrition to a Year 6 class.

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Paul had great difficulty convincing the children that Coco Pops are not the healthiest choice for breakfast. They told him about all the minerals and vitamins in the cereal, as described by Trapaga.

The children weren't as familiar with the cereal's other vital statistics, the ones that show it is high in sugar and low in fibre.

For Paul, the experience was a great reminder of the power of advertising, particularly on children. One more Australian study found that 54 per cent of Year 3 students believed that Ronald McDonald knew what was 'good for kids to eat'.<sup>57</sup>

Paul now belongs to The Parents Jury, an advocacy group founded in 2004 by Diabetes Australia (Victoria), The Cancer Council Australia and the Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity. The Coco Pops ad subsequently won the Smoke and Mirrors category in The Parents Jury's inaugural Children's TV Food Advertising Awards. The Parents Jury also wrote to Trapaga's agent and to Kellogg complaining about the ad.

The Parents Jury has also been lobbying the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to investigate some of the health claims made in advertising of breakfast cereals and snack bars. Craig Sinclair, a Parents Jury founder, and director of the cancer education unit at Cancer Council Victoria, says the group is also lobbying supermarkets to provide confectionery-free aisles at checkouts.

Sinclair says parents can be a powerful force in bringing about change, whether in schools, school canteens or supermarkets. 'Parents have the most important role to play in changing the environment,' he says. 'We have seen that in the sun protection programs in schools, which have been largely driven by parents demanding action at a local level.'

For more information, go to <http://www.parentsjury.org.au>.

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### **2. Young Media Australia**

Young Media Australia is a community-based organisation which provides information and advocacy about the impact of media on children.

See <http://www.youngmedia.org.au>.

### **3. TV-Turnoff Network**

Millions of people all over the world have participated in TV-Turnoff Week since it began in the United States in 1995. It encourages children and adults to watch much less television in order to promote healthier lives and communities.

For more information, go to <http://www.tvturnoff.org>.

### **4. White Dot**

White Dot is a British-based organisation that supports TV-Turnoff Week and also runs a number of campaigns to discourage TV use. One of its campaigns involved promoting Zocolos, the Mexican word for town square, by encouraging residents in neighbourhoods to sit outside their houses for a night instead of watching TV.

For more information, go to <http://www.whitedot.org>.

## 7. The pleasure principle, food and other psychological issues

Let's start with a sweeping generalisation: the world contains just two types of people. The first is those who choose their food according to the nutrients it contains and how healthy it is (or is not). This is a fairly small group, including mainly nutritionists and dietitians, as well as that minority of the population known as health food fanatics.

The second group is the rest of the world. We choose what we eat because it tastes good, or because of habit, or convenience, or cost, or whatever. We might think about how healthy it is, but if we are honest with ourselves, this is not usually the most important criterion. Often, we choose what we eat because of how it makes us feel or because of how we are feeling, even if we don't make this connection consciously. We might feel happy when eating a particular cake because of

## **The pleasure principle, food and other psychological issues**

the delicious flavour or because it reminds us of a cake that Mum used to make when we were kids. Or we might feel guilty when eating the cake because we have fallen into the trap of thinking some foods are bad, and that we are bad when we eat them. We might then feel so bad that we help ourselves to another few slices to try to make ourselves feel better.

If you stop and think about it, few aspects of our lives arouse more complex and deep emotions than food and its rituals. A thousand tortured soap operas could be written about our relationship with food and eating. People cook for each other to show their love and affection. They may also be trying to exert control over themselves or others. The ritual of eating together can forge deep connections. Or divisions. The whole gamut of emotions can be expressed and aroused when people prepare food or sit at the table—dislike, irritation, ambivalence, boredom, exhaustion, jealousy, rivalry and insecurity, to name a few of the more negative ones.

But for most people most of the time, food is associated with a far more positive experience: pleasure. A hedonistic streak runs deep in most of us, and we are seeking something far more gratifying than just fuel when we pick up a fork. In wealthy countries like Australia, where food is so abundant, eating has become something we do for pleasure rather than survival.

Unless you acknowledge and exploit the pleasure principle, you are unlikely to reach first base when trying to influence your family's food choices. It's all very well to tell your children—or even your partner—about the health benefits of fruit and vegetables. It is important that they understand these things. But they are unlikely to change their food preferences and eating habits purely on the basis of a food's health benefits. A far more effective strategy is to try to make sure that eating healthy food

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is associated with pleasure and good times. One study found that children and adolescents who have a healthy diet generally do so because they like the food they are eating.<sup>1</sup> The researchers suggested that promoting foods' taste and flavour, rather than their health benefits, will be most effective at encouraging people to eat them. The best way to convince children that healthy foods taste good is to really enjoy eating them yourself.

The last thing you want is for your children to associate healthy food with self-deprivation, punishment or feeling miserable.

### Applying the pleasure principle

The Harry Potter phenomenon shows that the best way to engage children in reading is to enchant them. The same goes when it comes to developing children's interest in food, says well-known chef Stephanie Alexander. In recent years, Alexander has devoted much of her time and energy to bewitching young children with the creativity, thrill and discovery that comes with growing and cooking fresh produce.

In 2001, Alexander helped set up a kitchen garden at Collingwood College, a relatively disadvantaged school in inner-city Melbourne. As part of their lessons, students from Years 3 to 6 learn to tend and harvest the garden, as well as prepare meals. Raspberry canes, an almond tree, fruit trees, vegetables, flowers and herbs were planted, and a chicken run was built. Within a few years, the produce was so bountiful that the children were learning to make preserves and to bottle tomato sauce and pesto.

Alexander rarely talks to students about whether foods contain fibre or vitamins or other nutrients. 'They're taboo words,' she says, 'because I believe they are the way to turn children off.' Instead, she is

## The pleasure principle, food and other psychological issues

more likely to ask the children to describe a flavour or a texture. She encourages their curiosity and helps them develop their new skills, such as rolling pastry or shelling peas.

Alexander became involved in the project because of her concern that so many young people lack basic cooking skills and exposure to fresh food. She also knew how much she had been influenced by her own childhood, when she and her siblings were actively involved in food production and preparation: working in the garden and milking the cows.

‘All of us still retain a more than average interest in what we eat,’ says Alexander. ‘What happened when we were young has stayed with us all forever. The earlier children learn about food through example and positive experiences, the better their food choices will be through life.’

The Collingwood children are learning much more than how to grow and prepare food. They are also getting plenty of exercise—turning the compost, pushing the wheelbarrow, spreading the mulch and digging—and learning about the environment. They are also developing new social skills, including how to behave at the table. It is clear, says Alexander, that many are used to eating in front of the television.

The garden has shone a media spotlight on the school, which has been good for the children’s self-esteem. ‘Their sense of importance has grown astronomically,’ says Alexander. ‘They realise they’re involved in something very special.’

In 2004, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation was established—its aim is to encourage and help other schools to establish similar projects.

The Foundation’s manifesto states:

‘We believe that the best way to encourage children to choose food that is healthy is to engage them in fun, hands-on experiences in growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing such food from the earliest possible age.’

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We believe that no-one embraces change in their behaviour if they think it will be unpleasant, uncomfortable or too difficult. Cautionary messages that food is ‘good-for-you’ or ‘bad-for-you’ do not resonate with young people.

We believe that children are more likely to experiment with foods they have grown or prepared themselves.

We believe that lifelong eating habits are developed early. We believe that children need positive models in their lives to reinforce that eating with others is a joyful activity, and one that they can enjoy as long as they live.

We believe that many young children do not receive such positive experiences at home, and therefore schools should consider including rich and interdisciplinary programmes that will fill this gap, as well as giving practical skills that will enable young people to take more responsibility for their own physical wellbeing.

We believe that the causes of obesity are complex and there is not one single solution, but we also believe that children who are encouraged to take a broad and active interest in food and the table from a very young age are rarely obese.’

Not everyone has access to a kitchen garden. But Stephanie Alexander’s philosophy—about making the preparation and consumption of fresh produce an enjoyable experience for everyone involved—is invaluable advice for the rest of us.

## Trusting your child

Babies and young children are smarter than adults in at least one important way. They usually know when they’ve had enough to eat. Their brain–stomach link is strong. After a big

## **The pleasure principle, food and other psychological issues**

feed, they instinctively reduce their next food intake. This has been shown in a number of experiments, and helps explain why toddlers' consumption at mealtimes can be so erratic. They will adjust how much they eat according to how much they've already had that day.<sup>2</sup>

In one experiment, children were given a drink before having free access to snacks. They consistently ate more when the drink was low on energy than when they were given a drink loaded with calories.<sup>3</sup> In another study, young children were allowed to eat as much as they wanted over 6 days, choosing from a menu containing foods they liked. The number of calories they ate at each meal varied widely, but their total daily energy intake was relatively constant.<sup>4</sup> The researchers concluded that children, despite having little knowledge of nutrition, are able to keep their energy intake relatively stable when they have control over what they eat. Another study found that when babies' milk is diluted, they rapidly adjust how much they drink to maintain their energy intake.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some researchers believe one of the reasons that breastfeeding seems to protect against later obesity is that breastfed babies learn to self-regulate their intake from an early age. When a baby is bottle-fed, they have less control over their milk intake.<sup>6</sup> This may also help explain why babies fed on formula grow more quickly than breastfed babies. (See Chapter 9 for more about breastfeeding.)

But in many older children, and perhaps most adults, the stomach–brain link has been corrupted. One study suggests that the connection starts eroding at an early age, as children start to take more notice of environmental cues than of what their body is telling them. Researchers found that 2 and 3-year-olds ate roughly the same amount whether or not they were

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given a regular size or a large portion. But children aged 4 to 6 ate 60 per cent more when their portion size was doubled.<sup>7</sup> We learn, as we get older, to start eating whether or not we are hungry, and to keep on eating even if we are no longer hungry. Perhaps that explains why so many parents don't trust their children to eat only as much as they need: the adults are so out of touch with their own internal cues and their stomach-brain link that they cannot imagine their children are any different.

Plus they have the weight of history on their shoulders. They come from a long line of parents who have struggled to raise children when food was scarce and who have encouraged children to clean their plates. They grew up being told, 'Be a good boy and eat up', so they pass this advice on to the next generation. Many parents and other family members equate expressing love with heaping a child's plate.

It is not surprising that many children lose the ability to know when they've had enough. Cultures and societies may vary in their traditions and rituals, but many share a deep-seated belief that children should be encouraged to eat up. According to University of Queensland parenting expert Professor Matt Sanders, many people define how well they are doing as a parent by whether their children are eating well. For many parents in many different cultures, this equates with children eating a lot.

It can be extremely hard for parents to resist these cultural and societal pressures, whether the pressures are stated or unstated. But being aware of them and their impact can make it easier for parents to help their children keep their stomach-brain connection. One way to do this is through the so-called division of responsibility, a now widely adopted concept that was developed by American paediatric dietitian and therapist Ellyn Satter (see breakout).

## **The pleasure principle, food and other psychological issues**

It holds that parents are responsible for the ‘what, when and where’ of feeding, and children are responsible for the ‘how much and whether’ of eating. In other words, parents are responsible for what food they serve their children and when and where they serve it, but children are responsible for how much of that food they eat—and whether they eat any of it at all.

This is not a cop-out for parents. It doesn’t mean they should abrogate all responsibility for their children’s eating or let them have as much junk food as they want. Parents have a crucial role in this process: ensuring that their children have a selection of tasty, healthy food served at the table at regular times. But they must also recognise that children will learn to eat a variety of foods and develop their self-regulation skills only when they are allowed to make their own choices about what they eat from their plate and how much they eat. It is about parents learning to trust their children, and children learning to trust their own skills.

Not surprisingly, parents who strongly encourage their children to eat up have heavier children.<sup>8</sup> Many studies have also shown that children who are poor at regulating their energy intake are also more likely to gain weight.<sup>9</sup> They are also more likely to have parents who are overly controlling about food. This control can take many forms. It might mean restricting ‘forbidden’ foods or encouraging consumption of ‘healthy’ foods. Or it might mean forcing, cajoling or even tricking children to keep eating even when they have clearly lost interest.<sup>10</sup> Whether children resist or comply with parental pressures, they are likely to end up eating more or less than they really want and losing touch with their body’s internal cues.

Parents might be overly controlling about what their children eat because they are used to controlling and worrying

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about their own weight and diet, or because they do not believe children have the ability to self-regulate, or because they are worried about their children's weight. But this can become another one of those self-perpetuating vicious circles: these sort of concerns lead to controlling feeding practices, which leads to children developing unhealthy eating patterns and losing their stomach–brain connection, which leads to weight gain, which leads to parental concerns.<sup>11</sup>

Parents who respect this division of responsibility at mealtimes will be doing far more than helping their child develop healthy eating patterns. For a start, mealtimes will be more pleasant and involve less tension and conflict, and this may have other benefits for the parent–child relationship. Ellyn Satter's long experience in working with families has taught her that feeding is a metaphor for the parent–child relationship more broadly. Parents who adopt this approach will probably treat their children the same sort of way in other areas of their lives. As well, children learn about themselves and the world from the way they are fed, says Satter. When eating becomes associated with coercion, arguments and conflict, it sends a powerful message about what to expect from the world and how to interact with others.

### The power of words

Never underestimate children. They hear the meaning behind what you are saying, even when you don't know what it is. Studies have shown that praising or rewarding children for polishing off their plate interferes with their ability to regulate their intake. In fact, many of

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the approaches parents and other carers use to try to get children to eat weaken children's stomach–brain connection:

- Experiments have shown that children learn to dislike foods when they are offered rewards for eating those foods. Telling children to 'eat your vegetables and you can watch TV' encourages them to dislike vegetables.
- Telling children to 'eat your vegetables and you can have a treat' is a double whammy; it teaches children that vegetables are no fun, and it reinforces the attraction of so-called treats.
- One experiment found that children who were rewarded for trying a new juice with a trip to the playground were less likely to sample that juice the next time they were offered it than children who had simply been allowed to experiment with it on their own.<sup>12</sup>
- Praising children for being 'good eaters' will encourage them to ignore the internal cues that tell them they have had enough to eat.
- Telling children who have left food on their plate to 'think of all the starving children in the world' will not only help them associate food with guilt, but will also encourage them to keep eating whether or not they are hungry.
- Telling children to eat certain foods because they are 'good for you' is likely to be ineffective and perhaps even counterproductive.<sup>13</sup> Like adults, children are more likely to eat healthy foods if they enjoy them. Who wants to feel as if they are taking medicine when they sit down to a meal?
- Saying, 'Johnny doesn't like spinach' in front of Johnny is a surefire way to ensure that Johnny doesn't develop a taste for spinach. If you say nothing about his refusal to eat spinach in the past, he may decide to try it next time it is offered.

## **Breaking free of the control factor**

When Ellyn Satter started writing a book about feeding children, based on her personal and professional experiences as a parent and paediatric dietitian in the United States, she realised that she was angry. She was angry at all the people who had given her bad advice over the years, angry at herself for having followed that advice with her own children, and angry at all the bad advice that was still in circulation.

As she researched the first edition of her book, *Child of Mine. Feeding with love and good sense* (1983), Satter came to see that one theme has recurred throughout the history of child feeding: the perceived need for authorities and parents to exert control over children's feeding and, in so doing, to ignore children's own needs, behaviours and capabilities.

During the 1930s, for instance, parents were given rigid guidelines about feeding infants with formula every 4 hours. Failing to follow this regimen would, they were warned, have dire physical and emotional consequences. More recently, the control tactics have continued under a different guise. Satter cites parents being admonished to get small babies to eat more and grow faster, while big babies were starved to slow their growth. Much 'well-meaning abuse' was continuing in the name of feeding, Satter concluded.

Satter, who has retrained as a mental health therapist and published an updated edition of her book in 2000, is responsible for developing the 'principle of division of responsibility' which gives children back appropriate control over their food. She says it fits with the principles of the authoritative style of parenting, which is associated with parents setting limits and enforcing rules while also listening to children's requests and supporting them in surveying and

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mastering their world. This parenting style is associated with children being self-reliant, self-controlled, inquisitive and content.

Authoritarian parents, on the other hand, are more likely to insist that their children stay at the table until their plate is cleared. This style of parenting, expecting immediate and unquestioning compliance with parental directives, is associated with obedient but unhappy children, who are more likely to be anxious, withdrawn or distrustful.

At the other extreme are permissive parents, who indulge the child's demands and do not set expectations or limits on the child's behaviour at the table or anywhere else. This parenting style is associated with aggressive children who lack self-control and are often disobedient or disrespectful.

Satter is concerned that the latest control tactics being touted by policy makers and health professionals involve instructions for parents to restrict their children's fat intake and weight. Such negative messages lead to struggles between parents and children, and feeding difficulties.

Healthy eating, says Satter, is not about restricting, controlling and avoiding. Rather, it is about enjoying food and learning to trust your children's ability to regulate how much they eat.

## Harnessing hunger

Hunger has been an unpleasant and dangerous enemy throughout human history. When our ancestors went hungry, they felt weak and ill, and were vulnerable to illness and attack. Not surprisingly, humans came to fear hunger, and do whatever it took to keep it at bay.

The recent dramatic changes in our environment mean that for many of the world's people, hunger is no longer the enemy. Instead, it is our unfamiliarity with hunger that causes problems. Not surprisingly, studies show that when

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children learn to eat when they are not hungry, they are more likely to put on excess weight.<sup>14</sup> Other studies have shown that obese children are less in touch with their internal satiety cues—they are more likely than other children to eat at a constant, quick pace, not slowing down as they reach the end of their meal.<sup>15</sup>

We have to become reacquainted with our former foe to ensure that children know what it feels like to be hungry, as well as what it feels like to satisfy that hunger. This doesn't mean starving or depriving children and making them miserable. That is likely to be counterproductive. Instead, try just asking them simple questions, to help them focus on whether they feel hungry or full.

In one study, US researchers found that with this approach, preschoolers' ability to regulate their energy intake was improved in just 6 weeks. Three and 4-year-old children were introduced to concepts of hunger and fullness (satiety) via a video, adult role playing and interactive play with dolls. The children were also encouraged to take note of how hungry or full they felt during and after their regular snack periods. Most children's ability to self-regulate improved: they became less likely to eat when they were not hungry or to refuse food when they were hungry. Finicky eaters who had previously over-responded to fullness cues benefited, as did heavier children who were used to overeating.<sup>16</sup>

## Comforting kids

Had a bad day at the office? An argument with your partner? A fight with a friend? In such situations, many people do one of two things: they reach for a soothing tipple or a comforting nibble.

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Most people learn very early in life that when they are upset, something nice to eat or drink will make them feel better. It's a message that parents, carers and advertisers are quick to reinforce. Just drink up/eat up and your blues will be banished.

Marge Overs was lucky that she learnt another positive association at an early age. Growing up in a country town, where she had to walk 3 kilometres just to get to the oval where she played sport every weekend, Marge came to associate feeling good with being active. She learnt that if she was having a tough day, a long walk would help boost her mood and give her space to think through her problems.

It is a lesson that is also helping her two children negotiate growing up in Sydney. When her 12-year-old daughter Clare is upset, Marge gives her time to settle down and then suggests they have a walk and talk; 9-year-old Patrick also enjoys his special walking time with Mum and insists on walking to school so they can talk.

Marge says she didn't deliberately set out to encourage her kids to walk when they were upset—it just evolved from them watching what she did. 'If I don't exercise, I'm more prone to getting down, so I use it as a physical and a mental boost', says Marge. 'It's my quiet time, my thinking time. When I'm cranky, I go out for a walk and try to sort it out in my head.'

Marge wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea—Clare and Patrick also enjoy their share of treats. Only saints can get by without occasionally using food as a comfort or reward for their children, she says.

The point is to be aware of the comfort habit and the impact it will have. Sometimes, this might be just the opposite of what you would like: if you give lollies to a child throwing a tantrum

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in the supermarket and demanding sweets, you are teaching the child that bad behaviour yields delicious rewards.

It is probably impossible, especially in this day and age, to avoid using food for comfort, at least sometimes. Even dietitians admit to doing this sometimes with their own children. But if children are given healthy foods for comfort from an early age, they may be more likely to reach for these foods as they get older.

You can also help your children associate other behaviours with being comforted—like going for a walk, doing a drawing, picking up a book, or having quiet time doing something together. Starting such habits early may bring lifelong benefits.

In years to come, when your children have had a rotten day at the office, they may be more likely to make themselves feel better by picking up a tennis racket than a six-pack.

## **Treats and other traps**

Mention treats to children these days, and they will most likely think of chips, lollies or other unhealthy snacks rather than a trip to the zoo or a game in the park. The use of food as a treat has become so widespread that it has virtually changed the meaning of the word ‘treat’.

Indeed, treats have become so common they are hardly treats any more. Instead of being an occasional indulgence for special occasions, they have become everyday foods. Many children expect to open their lunchbox and find biscuits, muesli bars or a packet of potato crisps. Many children have more than one such treat at school each day.<sup>17</sup> They also know that similar snacks will be available after school.<sup>18</sup>

As nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton says, abnormal eating patterns have become the norm. ‘I regard it as normal to have

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all kinds of junk food at a party', says Stanton, 'but it is abnormal to have party food every day after school.'

The normalisation of treats is bad news for children, because such foods, by their very nature, tend to be high in fat, sugar and/or salt. The rise of treats has had two harmful consequences for children: it is one of the main reasons their energy intake has increased and is an important contributor to expanding waistlines, and it means that children are less likely to eat the nutritious foods they need for healthy growth and development.

Children, it could be said, are at risk of being 'treated' to poor health.

The second uncomfortable theme that emerges from the research is that there is no simple solution to the treat issue, especially when so many aspects of children's environment—their friends' lunchboxes, the advertisements they see on TV, the supermarket aisles and so on—are saturated with treats. These days many children would be unlikely to go through a normal day without being exposed to treats in some setting or other.

At the same time, research shows that many parents believe that restricting or forbidding certain foods will make their child less likely to want that food. They are wrong. The opposite is true. Many studies have shown that children are more likely to want foods that are restricted or forbidden. They are also more likely to eat them even when they are not hungry.<sup>19</sup> Forbidding children to eat junk food may only encourage them to do so.

You could be beginning to feel like throwing in the towel about now. It's starting to sound as if you're damned if you put sweets in the lunchbox and damned if you don't. What to do?

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How can you try to reduce children's consumption of unhealthy treats without making the problem worse?

Here are some things to think about:

- Why do you give your children treats? Do you feel you are depriving them if you don't? Is it because all their friends are getting treats and you don't want them to miss out? If so, it might help to try to rethink what treats really mean for you and your children. Too much junk food is not really a treat at all—it may be depriving them of good health. If you want to give yourself or your children a treat, can you do it with something other than food? If you start to change the way you think about treats, it might just rub off on those around you.

- Treats are a valid part of a normal, healthy diet—but only if they truly are treats. Ellyn Satter recommends being matter of fact when talking to kids about treats and why they are fine as occasional or 'sometimes' foods.<sup>20</sup> Taking care to remove the emotion and special attention from treats will help your kids keep them in their proper place—something to enjoy occasionally.

- Dr Clare Collins, a lecturer in nutrition and dietetics at the University of Newcastle, suggests families make an agreement about how many treats they can have each week; she also recommends making gradual changes. She cites one survey showing that primary school children in the Hunter Valley area of New South Wales were having an average of five treats a day. Moving to five treats a week would be a significant improvement. She says some families have put aside the money they save through reducing food treats, and used it on other treats—such as a trip to the pool—and this has worked well for them.

## **One parent's solution**

Professor Stephen Leeder, Director of the Australian Health Policy Institute at the University of Sydney, has some memories from childhood he would rather forget. He was overweight in the days when it was unusual for kids to carry extra kilos.

Teased mercilessly about his weight, Leeder learnt to dread swimming carnivals. Almost 60 years later, the memories remain acute. 'The embarrassment of the whole pudgy package was something awful,' he says. 'I wouldn't wish that on anyone.'

Leeder has battled all his life with weight. He was at his trimmest in the 1960s when he was in Papua New Guinea, working hard physically and eating mainly vegetables. 'Genes, environment, stress—you name it, they all conspire,' he says. 'How nice it would be if my addiction was not "fed" by people always wanting to feed me and food being so readily, bountifully, beautifully, cheaply available.'

Leeder's public health background gives him a broad perspective on society's weight problem. He sees it as the result of a complex interplay of urban design, societal, and food production factors. 'There are no quick fixes or magic bullets,' he says. 'It's a complex problem with multiple players.'

But in his own home, Leeder has found one low-key strategy particularly helpful for encouraging his teenage son James towards healthy snacks. When James or his friends complain about being hungry, Leeder doesn't ask what they want. He just cuts up fruit, makes an attractive platter, and puts it in front of the teenagers without making any comment.

'The fruit goes,' he says.

## 8. Five practical strategies for eating well

If you're sick and tired of being told what not to eat, you are in good company. The nutrition industry has a long and not particularly endearing history of tut-tutting. Years of negative messages—'You shouldn't eat this', 'You shouldn't eat that'—have left their mark. Many people have tuned out, or become irritated and confused by advice which is conflicting, complex or difficult to incorporate into their lives.

This section aims to give you some practical strategies for improving your family's eating habits. Wherever possible, these are put in positive terms—some things that you can try rather than lists of what not to do. Not every idea will appeal, or suit you. Just have a read and see what might work for you and your family. Remember that the goal is not perfection; it is to find small changes that can be sustainable long term.

## 1. Wonderful water

There are many reasons to encourage children to drink more water. They often forget to drink up, so remind them. Making water a regular part of the daily routine helps stop dehydration, and dehydration can lead to irritation and headaches. By the time children feel thirsty, they are often already dehydrated.

But perhaps the best reason is that making glasses and cups and bottles of water a normal and expected part of children's everyday life will make them less likely to reach for soft drink or cordial. Many studies have connected increased consumption of sweetened drinks with expanding waistlines. Soft drinks have been called the 'quintessential junk food' because they are high on calories and low on nutrients.<sup>1</sup> It has been estimated that a 600ml bottle of soft drink contains about 17 teaspoons of sugar and 200 calories, which takes about 45 minutes of moderate physical activity to burn up.<sup>2</sup> Australian children are drinking more and more sugar; about a third of all the sugar they consume is in sweetened drinks.<sup>3</sup> There is also some evidence that sugar in drinks or liquids is more likely to lead to weight gain than sugar ingested in solid form.<sup>4</sup> Many children also drink too much fruit juice, which can contain just as much sugar as soft drinks. It is generally advised not to give children fruit juice, or to give them a maximum of one glass per day.

Apart from the calorie issues, sweetened drinks are also bad for children's dental health. And when they fill up on soft drinks or other sweet drinks, they have less room for nutritious foods, which can lead to problems such as calcium deficiency, anaemia and failure to thrive.

It also means children are less likely to have milk. Not drinking enough milk can increase the risk of calcium

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deficiency and long-term problems such as osteoporosis. Around three glasses of milk a day provides enough calcium for children's bone development. Some research also suggests that soft drink can increase the risk of such problems in later life because of its effect on bones.

Milk is a healthy and tasty alternative for meals or snacks. However, children should not have cow's milk until they turn 1, because a baby's kidneys cannot cope with it. For 1 and 2-year-olds, full-cream milk is suitable. Hi-low milks are recommended for children aged 2 to 5. Low-fat milks are recommended for children over 5 who are eating well and enjoying lots of different foods.

Getting your family into the habit of having a jug of water on the meal table, or helping themselves to a bottle of cold water from the fridge is a relatively simple but important step towards better health. It will probably also help your budget.

Recommended consumption per day is:

- 5 glasses\* (1 litre) for 5 to 8-year-olds;
- 7 glasses (1.5 litres) for 9 to 12-year-olds; and
- 8–10 glasses (2 litres) for 13+ years.

\* a glass is 200ml<sup>5</sup>

Children will need more if they are exercising or sweating due to heat.

Some tips include:

- Stop buying soft drink and cordials. It is much easier to promote water if there is no sweet alternative lurking in the fridge or cupboards.
- Cut up fruit and encourage your children to have that rather than fruit juice. Many children drink way too much juice and suffer diarrhoea and tooth decay as a result.

## **Five practical strategies for eating well**

- Make water and milk attractive options. Make sure they are easily accessible in the fridge. Serve water with slices of fruit or ice blocks, or in decorated jugs or bottles. Freeze water bottles for taking to school. Always have fresh water in the car or in your bag on outings.
- Give children their own water bottles, and make sure they are not too big for a small person to handle.
- Lead the way. Quench your own thirst with water. Get the taste for it. Make a habit of it.

## **2. Vegetables first**

The phrase ‘fruit and vegetables’ rolls off the tongue more easily, but it is ‘vegetables and fruit’ that we need to talk about, because vegetables need to be given much higher priority than they usually get. Many children do not eat nearly enough fruit or vegetables but they (and their parents) are particularly likely to be deficient in the vegetables stakes. The sweetness of fruit tends to make it more appealing to many palates.

It would be almost impossible to have missed all the positive news about vegetables and fruit in recent years. Study after study shows that people who eat plenty of vegetables and fruit are also less likely to develop a stack of serious diseases and are more likely to enjoy better health. Of course this could at least partly reflect that people who eat plenty of vegetables and fruit are also more likely to enjoy healthier lifestyles in other ways—they are probably more likely to be physically active, for example. But the more that scientists investigate the thousands of compounds that are found in vegetables and fruit, the more health-giving properties they discover. For children’s developing bodies and brains, these nutrients are extra important.

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But there's another side to vegetables and fruit which isn't so widely appreciated. It involves the energy-density versus nutrient-density concept. Foods that are rich in fat and/or sugar are called energy-dense because they pack a hefty calorie count per gram. They tend to be less bulky than some other foods, meaning it is easy to consume a lot of calories before you feel full. It is particularly easy to overeat when fat and/or sugar are involved, because they taste so good. Humans evolved in times when there was an advantage to preferring energy-dense foods, and the food industry encourages these tendencies because fatty, sweet foods also involve higher profit margins.<sup>6</sup>

Nutrient-dense foods, on the other hand, pack a lot of nutrients into every gram but have fewer calories. They also tend to be bulkier, because of their higher water content. Several studies suggest that water in foods has a greater effect on our feeling of fullness than water consumed in drinks. You can feel full on fewer calories by eating foods with a high moisture content, such as vegetables and fruit.<sup>7</sup>

If your family eats plenty of nutrient-dense foods—such as vegetables, fruit and whole grains—they will not only reap the benefits of health-promoting nutrients. They may also feel more satisfied because of the bulk, and will have less room for foods rich in fat and sugar. This means they may be able to reduce their energy and fat intake without having to work at it—thus reducing the feelings of deprivation and self-denial which so often accompany efforts to cut back and are so counterproductive. This may be one of the reasons why people whose diets are based on nutrient-dense foods are less likely to be overweight.<sup>8</sup> They have discovered that they can eat a greater volume of food while eating fewer calories. Doesn't that sound so much more satisfying than your typical self-denying diet?

## **Victory with vegetables**

‘Many people do not like to eat vegetables—and the feeling is mutual.’ That memorable line comes from a scientific article explaining that the reason vegetables are so good for us is also the reason that many people prefer sweets to spinach.<sup>9</sup> Plants protect themselves against being eaten by secreting natural pesticides and other toxins, which are usually bitter, acidic or astringent.

In the small doses found in plants, many of these compounds are beneficial for human health. But their flavour does not naturally appeal to human palates because we have evolved to be suspicious of bitterness as a way of protecting ourselves against poisons. Humans are much more sensitive to bitter flavours than to sweet ones—we can detect bitterness at much lower concentrations than we can detect sweetness.

Adults often develop a liking for bitter or acidic flavours—this is especially easy when the bitter flavour is associated with a pleasing effect, as with the jump-start of caffeine in coffee. But babies and young children have an instinctive aversion to such flavours, and need time and opportunity to learn that it is safe to eat them.

Professor David Laing is a neuroscientist at the Sydney Children’s Hospital who has spent many years investigating the mysteries of human preferences in taste and smell. His experiments with newborns show that they make distinctive facial expressions in response to different flavours. They make a smile-like expression when a few drops of sucrose solution are put on their tongue, purse their lips in response to sourness, and gag in response to bitter flavours.

Laing’s research has also shown that 8-year-old boys need twice as much sugar as adults before they detect sweetness, which indicates that their sensory system is still developing. Sensitivity to flavours varies greatly between individuals, but such findings might help explain why some children seem to have such a sweet tooth—

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it could just be that their sensory system is still immature.

Laing's work has also shown that taste preferences develop early in life, and are fairly well established by age 4 or 5. The main implication of this, Laing says, is that a variety of foods should be offered to children from an early age. 'Our advice would be to get as many different fruit and vegetables into your children as early in life as possible', he says.

Most children will reject most new foods when they are offered them. They may need to see a food several times before they will taste it, and they may need to taste it several times before they eat it. They are just following their instinct for self-preservation—they have to learn that a new food is safe to eat. 'Don't give up on the first or second go', says Laing. 'Most children will accept it by the fifth try. Some may take ten times.'

Apart from persistence, patience is the other virtue required. When a child repeatedly rejects food that you have bought or prepared or perhaps even grown, only a saint would not feel a twinge of annoyance and frustration. It can be tempting, especially if the family budget is stretched, to give up and offer your child something you know they will eat, such as a muesli or fruit bar.

If you can resist this urge and avoid making a fuss about a refusal to try the new food, there is a better chance that they might try it next time. Children are quick learners: if they see that rejecting a certain food provokes an emotional reaction or leads to them being given something else that they like, they may continue to reject it.

Ellyn Satter says that generations of parents have been taught that children don't like vegetables, and have themselves created that reality by forcing, enticing and rewarding their children to eat vegetables. Children should be allowed to learn to like vegetables at their own speed and in their own way, she says.

Of course all this is far easier said than done. If it is too hard to stick to your guns today, try again tomorrow. Don't give up. And don't feel you've failed because of a setback or three.

## **How much should children eat?<sup>10</sup>**

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that:

- children aged 4 to 7 should eat at least 1 serve of fruit and 2 serves of vegetables or legumes each day;
- children aged 8 to 11 should eat at least 1 serve of fruit and 3 serves of vegetables or legumes each day; and
- youth aged 12 to 18 should eat at least 3 serves of fruit and 4 of vegetables or legumes each day.

One serve of vegetables is: 1 cup of dark green leafy vegetable such as spinach or lettuce; or 1 cup of orange or yellow vegetables such as carrot; or 1 cup of legumes; or 1 potato. One serve of fruit is: 1 medium-sized piece of fruit such as an apple or orange; or 1 cup of diced fruit or canned fruit.

### **Helpful hints**

- Eat more vegetables and fruit yourself (only about 1 in 10 Australian adults meets even the minimum recommendation for both vegetable and fruit consumption).<sup>11</sup> And eat a greater variety. Enjoy them and make them part of your daily routine. Establish habits: try having fruit with your breakfast every day, or a piece of fruit after dinner. Create a family tradition—that everyone tries a new food at the start of every month, for example. Make these a fruit or vegetable sometimes.
- Don't let your own preferences narrow your child's palate—don't assume they will share your likes and dislikes. If you don't like carrots, don't let this stop you serving them to your child. And don't make disparaging comments.

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- Offer vegetables and fruit in a casual manner, assuming the child will enjoy them. Don't serve them loaded up with emotion and expectation—this will be counterproductive. Don't pressure, force or bribe your child to eat them.
- Telling children to eat their greens because 'they are good for you' is likely to be unhelpful. Instead, show that you like eating greens yourself.
- Involve your child. Get them to help in selecting what to buy at the shops or what to harvest from the garden, and then involve them in food preparation. If they are too young to use a knife, they can wash the produce.
- Keep offering a variety of vegetables and fruit in small portions. Don't be put off by rejection. Familiarity may lead to acceptance.
- Offer vegetables and fruit as snacks as well as at mealtimes. Deakin University researcher Dr Kylie Ball is used to hearing parents say, 'My child doesn't like fruit or vegetables.' Often she has seen that same child help themselves to fruit and vegetables when they are not given any other options for snacks.
- Offer them in different forms: raw, cooked, canned, dried or frozen. Stewed fruit is delicious for breakfast, dessert and snacks. Many children prefer their vegetables raw. Or dress them up with a splash of olive oil or a squeeze of lemon or a grating of cheese.
- In difficult times, many parents find it helpful to disguise vegetables and fruit—for example, by putting grated zucchini in mince patties or bolognese sauce, or making a vegetable dip or fruit smoothie.
- Present and store vegetables and fruit in a way that makes them attractive and easily accessible. Let your child know there is a special place in the fridge where they can find small bags or

## Five practical strategies for eating well

containers of diced carrots, apples and other produce. Thread small pieces of fruit and/or vegetables onto a kebab stick.

- Young children are more likely to enjoy vegetables and fruit if fun is involved. Make a colourful face on their plate. Count how many grapes or berries are in the bowl. Tell a story about Peter Pumpkin or Samantha Spinach.

- Experiment. Don't keep buying and cooking the same old things. This habit often ends up meaning reduced vegetable and fruit consumption. And don't just experiment with unfamiliar produce; prepare some of your old favourites in new ways or experiment with different ways of presenting them.

- Many people think vegetables take too long to prepare—but there are plenty of quick, simple dishes which can be whipped up in less time than it takes to order takeaway. You just need to get the right recipes.

- If you buy fresh produce when it is in season, it will be cheaper and taste better.

- The cost of vegetables and fruit is a major barrier for many families. Can you buy direct from the markets? Is there a local co-operative with discount prices? Could you join with other families and buy in bulk?

- If lack of time is stopping you from buying as much fresh produce as you would like, investigate other options: can you get home delivery, or order over the internet, or share the produce shopping with another family?

- Don't give up. If your children are eating some vegetables and fruit, that is better than if they are eating none. If they are eating more than they used to, that is a great step forward. Even better if you are eating more than before yourself.

### What children say

Ask a bunch of 11-year-olds what they think about vegetables, and the message comes back loud and clear: they are good for you but they have a terrible image problem.

That was the firm opinion of one Year 6 class from Wilkins Public School at Marrickville in inner-western Sydney. The students, who generously donated an afternoon to share their thoughts with this book's readers, had plenty of nice things to say about fruit. But they felt vegetables were given a pretty raw deal; everything from TV programs to children's books portrayed them as unappealing.

'They just have a bad reputation,' said Eliza. 'Kids would say they hate brussel sprouts and they haven't even tried them. Even kids' books say brussel sprouts are gross. They don't taste gross; they just taste like cabbage. Vegies are advertised as something good for you, and a lot of kids don't care about that.'

Darcy agreed that vegies were poorly promoted. There were far more ads on TV for lollies and cars than vegies, she said. 'Some people think I am weird because I am a big fan of cabbage and artichokes and brussel sprouts,' she added. 'Seriously, I like the yucky vegies.'

Patrick felt that TV shows also contributed to vegies' bad reputation by implying that 'eating fruit and vegetables is punishment'.

When asked how they liked their vegies prepared, the general consensus from the class was that raw beats cooked hands down. 'I don't like the texture and taste of cooked vegies,' said Alice.

Tammy agreed with her classmates that vegies were treated unfairly. 'People don't think they taste nice but they are quite nice,' she said.

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The message, for food producers, advertisers, parents and others who care for children, seems clear. Vegetables need a snappy PR agent—someone who can lift their profile and transform them from ‘dull but worthy’ to ‘hip and happening’.

Sounds like a good creative project for some clever 11-year-olds...

### The best way to lose weight— without even trying

Many women find they gain weight after having children. They are so busy they don't have much time for regular exercise or for looking after themselves.

But Jenni Adams shed several kilograms in the years following the births of her daughters, Sarah and Sophie, without even trying to lose weight.

The weight loss followed changes that Jenni made to her family's routines after being trained as a volunteer ‘peer educator’ to spread the word about the importance of good nutrition to other parents. Jenni, who lives in the small town of Penguin on the northwest coast of Tasmania, did the course after falling into some unhealthy habits when working long hours as a manager in the health sector. She often skipped meals and ate poorly.

After having her girls, now aged 6 and 4, she enrolled in the Family FoodPATCH project, which was funded through the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, and run through the Child Health Association and Playgroup Tasmania. About 100 parents across Tasmania were trained as volunteer peer educators until the project ended in 2004.

Apart from sharing her new knowledge with other parents, Jenni made changes at home. ‘I realised that a lot of things I thought were

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OK, like cordial, white bread and full-fat milk, weren't good things,' she says. 'I had a daughter who would drink only cordial. So I got everyone drinking water and plain milk. I made other more gradual changes, using more whole grain products and having more vegetables and fruit.'

Now when Jenni goes to the supermarket, Sarah and Sophie choose the fruit and vegetables. 'They pick anything that's a baby,' says Jenni. 'We have baby corn, baby bok choy, baby anything. They're really open to trying stuff.' The girls also help with planning the week's menu and preparing meals. 'They have a lot more buy in,' says Jenni, 'so they are more prepared to try things.'

When giving talks to other parents, Jenni gives hints about how to 'hide' vegetables in sauces, muffins and cakes. She empathises when other mothers complain about a partner who refuses to change their eating habits.

'It's the husband factor,' says Jenni. 'It's a big issue. I'm prepared to make the changes in my diet to make a good example to the kids, but he prefers white bread, doesn't like cereals, wouldn't choose to eat fresh fruit, doesn't particularly like vegies, drinks soft drink, and snacks on salamis and cheeses.'

So what does she recommend to parents facing such a dilemma? There are no simple solutions, says Jenni, but her own approach has been to stick to her guns without resorting to food wars. 'I find that the biggest challenge is how to set the example, knowing that I'm only half of the example. All I can do is try and show that the right foods are the delicious foods.'

Jenni doesn't stress when her children have lollies or takeaways, so long as their diet balances out over the week. She has watched other parents' strictness result in children gorging themselves on junk at parties. 'I don't deprive my kids of those sorts of foods but they don't have a lot of them,' she says. 'At a birthday party they are more than

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likely to choose the strawberries and pineapple than the cakes and lollies.

‘We don’t talk about good foods and bad foods. We talk about things you have a little bit of and things you have a lot of. I don’t talk of food as treats. If they want a treat or a surprise, it might be a book or a sticker or a new pair of undies.’

Jenni makes a point of not discussing her weight in front of the girls. When her weight loss attracts comment, she emphasises that she hasn’t been dieting. ‘I’m very conscious of saying “I’m just living a healthy life”’, she says. ‘I’m just more active and eating better.’

### 3. Hopping into breakfast

Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast, the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde once quipped. His remark captures many people’s ambivalence about the morning meal, but does no justice to its significance. Breakfast is important for many reasons, not least that it really does encourage brilliance.

Breakfast is vital for refuelling the body and brain after the night’s rest. Children who skip breakfast are more likely to have difficulty concentrating, learning and behaving appropriately in class. Breakfast is an important foundation of a healthy balanced diet; children who miss the morning meal are also likely to miss out on vital nutrients and to suffer constipation. People who skip breakfast are more likely to overcompensate later in the day by eating too many calories. Those who eat breakfast are less likely to gain weight and are also more likely to sustain weight loss.<sup>12</sup>

However, many parents feel too busy or too stretched to make breakfast a priority. Mornings might be difficult enough already. These are the reasons often given for allowing children

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free rein at breakfast time. As a result, too many children skip breakfast or have muesli bars or other concoctions of fat and sugar. One study of 5000 Australian schoolchildren found that 1 in 5 had nothing more than soft drink, cordial, tea, coffee or water for breakfast. Many children said they would not prepare breakfast themselves but would eat it if it was put in front of them or their parents reminded them to eat it.<sup>13</sup>

You don't have to be brilliant at making breakfast. The easier it is for everyone, the better. Here are some ideas that might help:

- Make breakfast a family habit—this means breakfast for everyone.
- Make time—you can make and drink a banana smoothie in a few minutes.
- Involve your children in selecting and preparing breakfast.
- Offer a variety of choices: cereal, fruit, toast, eggs, leftovers.
- Vary what is on offer—and eat according to what's in season.
- Have something special—maybe a picnic in the garden or the park—on weekends and other special occasions.

## 4. Shop smart

I have a theory about grocery shopping. As far as I know, it's never been tested by researchers, but it works for me. The theory is that the bigger the supermarket you visit, the more money you will spend and the more rubbish you will buy. That's certainly what happens with me. The more aisles containing junk food and processed food I have to push my trolley up and down, the more of these foods end up in my trolley. There must be some truth to the theory—otherwise why would supermarkets have turned into such super-sized monsters?

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Conversely, if I start my weekly shop at the greengrocer, I end up with more vegetables and fruit, and less money and time for other foods. It's a sad sign of the times, however, that not everyone these days has access to a well-stocked and affordable greengrocer or a small supermarket.

Nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton has another approach. She sticks to the outside aisles of supermarkets, where the fresh produce tends to be displayed, and doesn't take her trolley down the inside aisles. Stanton has been told that one supermarket chain has 1765 snack foods on its shelves—those are exactly the shelves she advises avoiding.

Wherever you shop, keep in mind that mantra about making healthy choices the easy choices. What you buy determines how easy it is for your family to make healthy food choices—it's so much easier when there are no potato crisps or soft drink in the cupboard. Research shows that children are more likely to eat unhealthy snacks and to have soft drink if they are available at home. They are also more likely to eat fruit and vegetables if they are available at home.<sup>14</sup>

Stanton also advises being sceptical about foods that are promoted on the basis of health claims. Often these products will be more expensive but no better than foods which contain the same ingredients but do not make health claims. Stanton once did a quasi-experiment with a TV reporter in which they each took a trolley around the supermarket. The reporter filled his trolley with foods making a health claim and Stanton filled her trolley with equivalent foods of at least equal health value but that did not make any health claim on the packaging. Her bill at the checkout was significantly less than the reporter's.

In fact, it is advisable to have a healthy dose of scepticism whenever you see or hear claims made about the health

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benefits of foods, especially if they are processed goods. The food industry has a long history of engaging nutritionists and nutrition organisations in its marketing efforts. It does this by funding research, conferences and public relations and marketing campaigns. As US nutritionist Professor Marion Nestle points out in her book, *Food Politics* (2002), food companies are skilled at co-opting scientific and medical experts to support their marketing objectives, and they routinely place shareholders' needs over public health considerations. 'Food companies will make and market any product that sells, regardless of its nutritional value or its effect on health,' Nestle says.

Rather than relying on claims the food industry makes about its products, get to know the food pyramid endorsed by health authorities around the world. Try to make sure that your trolley includes different groups of food in the proportions of the pyramid.



Food pyramid

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Here are a few more tips for shopping well:

- Buy fresh produce that is in season. It will be cheaper and taste better, and you will also be doing the environment a favour—think how much energy is involved in transporting a punnet of strawberries halfway round the world.
- Plan ahead. Work out a menu for the week, and stick to your shopping list. Depending on their age, involve your children in planning and shopping. Get them to tell you the prices of different foods so they learn to work out value for money.
- Include a range of healthy snacks for after school on your shopping list. This is a key time of day when many children fill up on foods that are high in fat and sugar. Some research suggests that many children choose what to eat after school themselves, and that parents could play a greater role in ensuring healthy options are available.<sup>15</sup> If plenty of healthy snacks are available, it will be easier for children to choose well.
- Learn to read food labels and encourage the rest of your family to do the same. Be sceptical about health claims on food packaging—they are not always what they seem, and are often designed to confuse and mislead. When foods are described as ‘lite/light’, this may refer to the taste, texture, fat, salt or sugar content. Light products may not be lower in energy than other products. Reduced fat does not necessarily mean low fat, and these products often have so much sugar added that their calorie count is no less than the normal products. Reduced-salt products may still be high in salt even though they contain less salt than usual. Foods that contain toasted or oven-baked ingredients are likely to be high in fat. Foods that have ‘no

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added sugar' may contain other sources of sugar such as fruit sugars or milk sugars. Advertising such as '90 per cent fat free' sounds less enticing when you realise this means that fat makes up 10 per cent of the product. Sometimes labels give the amount of fat and calories per 100g when a typical serve is much more than 100g. Food Standards Australia has more information about food labels: <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/whatsinfood/foodlabelling.cfm>.

- Don't go shopping on an empty stomach. Do not treat children with food when you go shopping. They will quickly learn to expect such treats, which will make shopping even more stressful than it need be. Find another way to treat them after shopping—perhaps a play on the swings or a visit to the library.
- Cost is a major issue for many families. However, there are lots of ideas for cheap healthy shopping and recipes around—see the Further Resources section of the Appendices lists. You can also save money by buying in bulk, buying bread when it's on special and freezing it, and making up large quantities of soup, stews, curries etc. and freezing them. Vegetables and fruit are often going at bargain prices if you go to markets late in the day. Dried beans, peas and lentils are cheap, nutritious and tasty. Staple foods such as rice and pasta are also relatively cheap and filling.
- Fresh fruit and vegetables may seem expensive, but they're not if you compare their cost on a dollar per kilogram basis with popular snacks such as muesli bars. Some popular snacks cost more than \$30 per kilogram.
- Make a family policy on takeaways. This might mean setting a limit on how often you have takeaway—perhaps once a week or once a fortnight. It might also mean

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choosing healthier takeaways. When eating out, avoid the 'meal deals' and 'kids' menus', because these are often loaded with fat.

- If you eat out occasionally, make the most of it and don't worry about nutritional issues. But if eating out is a regular part of your routine, look for the healthy choices on the menu and be conscious of portion sizes.

### Make the most of the season

#### Shopping in spring

Avocados, bananas, grapefruit, kiwi fruit, mangoes, oranges, rockmelon, strawberries, watermelon, pawpaw.

Asparagus, beans, beetroot, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, celery, lettuce, mushrooms, onions, peas, potato, pumpkin, silverbeet, spinach, zucchini.

#### Shopping in summer

Apricots, bananas, cherries, figs, grapes, mangoes, nectarines, oranges, passionfruit, peaches, pineapple, plums, rockmelon, rhubarb, strawberries, watermelon, pawpaw.

Beans, capsicum, celery, corn, cucumber, lettuce, mushrooms, onions, potato, pumpkin, tomato, zucchini.

#### Shopping in autumn

Apples, avocados, bananas, figs, grapes, oranges, passionfruit, pears, rockmelon, watermelon.

Beetroot, broccoli, capsicum, cauliflower, celery, corn, cucumber, eggplant, mushrooms, onions, potato, pumpkin, silverbeet, spinach, tomato, zucchini.

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### Shopping in winter

Apples, avocados, figs, grapefruit, kiwi fruit, lemons, mandarins, oranges, pears.

Beetroot, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, corn, eggplant, mushrooms, onions, parsnip, potato, pumpkin, silverbeet, spinach.

## Shopping for the environment

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Many people feel they are doing their bit for the environment by using cloth shopping bags rather than disposable plastic bags. Buying fresh, unprocessed whole foods with a minimum of packaging is also doing a favour for the environment—as well as your health.

No less an authority than the National Health and Medical Research Council advises that we should consider more than the nutrient content when we go shopping for food. Dietary guidelines endorsed by the National Health and Medical Research Council state that eating in line with sustainable development includes avoiding overconsumption, eating food produced locally and in season, and eating less processed food.<sup>16</sup> Following these suggestions is likely to be good for your health as well as for the environment. As a general rule, the more highly packaged a food is, the more likely it is to be highly processed and energy dense.

Vast resources are used in the production of some highly processed foods, but some unprocessed foods can also take a heavy toll on the environment. For nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton, grain-fed meat production is a wasteful, inefficient exercise. It takes many kilograms of grain to produce 1 kilogram of meat, she says.

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Liz Sanzaro, a food educator at Box Hill TAFE in Victoria, is deeply concerned at environmentally unfriendly practices in the production of many foods. As a general rule, she advises avoiding foods where the source is not clearly identifiable. 'You should be able to recognise what your food was 24 hours ago,' she says. 'If it wasn't picked off a tree, dug out of the ground or harvested from a bush or tree, or slaughtered or fished, it's a heavily manufactured product. When choosing cereals, can you recognise what sort of grass it was? If you can't recognise what plant it's come from, be highly suspicious of it.'

Sanzaro cites margarine as a prize example of a heavily manufactured food. She prefers to promote the use of butter—but in very small quantities. 'Environmentally I'm aghast at the trend to gobble up 15 kilos of vegetable and nut material (good foods in themselves) to extract 1 kilo of phytosterols so that this material can be incorporated into a plastic spreadable fat and marketed to consumers as an effective way to reduce cholesterol,' she wrote in a letter to the Food Chain newsletter.

The more manufactured a product is, the more complicated it is to work out its health benefits, says Sanzaro, whose motto is, 'Keep it simple.' She is a big fan of the Slow Food Movement, an international collaboration which encourages the consumption of locally grown produce that is in season (for more information, see <http://www.slowfood.com>).

Sanzaro's other staple advice is to focus on making small changes to the way you shop, cook and eat. When you feel overwhelmed by the prospect of making change, she suggests working on one small area at a time. For example, choose a couple of less processed foods at a time, and learn to prepare them and incorporate them into your regular diet; then take on another few. This helps keep it manageable.

'How do you eat an elephant?' asks Sanzaro. 'One bite at a time.'

### Community Foodies

Many of the families who could most benefit from good nutrition advice are least likely to be able to get it. This might be because they are strapped for cash, or because they are busy with other issues—or just because of the stresses of everyday life.

Some people also find it confronting to deal with health professionals. Doctors and nutritionists can sound as if they are speaking a different language from the rest of us. Well-paid professionals can find it hard to understand what it is like to struggle to find enough money to pay the rent.

Community Foodies, an innovative program in South Australia, has been training ‘peer educators’ as a way of overcoming some of these barriers. The program is based on the principle that it is easier to learn from people of a similar age, background and socio-economic status as yourself.

The peer educators, or ‘Community Foodies’, are given training in basic nutrition, presentation and group skills. They give talks to schools, play groups, mothers’ groups and other community organisations, and also work with community vegetable gardens, school canteens and breakfast clubs. They often become local advocates for improving nutrition choices in their area.

Community Foodies has had many benefits. Apart from helping improve people’s skills and knowledge around food, it has helped boost the self-esteem and confidence of those involved and to build closer ties within communities and between community members and health services.

Here are the stories of three Community Foodies:

#### **Better food, better life**

Adelaide woman Sandy Tindall, 46, has had a tough life. She grew up in an abusive family situation and didn’t have the opportunity to learn about cooking when she was young.

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When Sandy had her own children, she didn't have the knowledge or skills to feel confident in the kitchen. She brought them up on a diet largely of takeaways, bread and chips.

When Sandy heard about the Community Foodies program, she was struggling to make ends meet on a pension. After paying her bills, some weeks there was just \$10 left over for food.

Through the Community Foodies training program, she learnt how to stretch her food budget and to make cheap healthy meals using lots of vegetables. She then became involved in running groups to pass her new-found knowledge, skills and confidence on to other people. The groups included people recently released from jail, women facing domestic violence, and people struggling with drug and alcohol problems.

'Lots of the mums who come to my groups said their problem was how to get the kids to eat vegies,' says Sandy. 'So we learnt how to disguise vegies. We started making vegie hamburgers, dips and spring rolls.'

In the past few years, Sandy, has helped about 200 women learn how to feed their families better. She has also seen the benefits for her own family, especially her five young grandchildren. 'We have fun in the kitchen,' she says. 'They learn how to peel vegies.'

But one of the program's main benefits for Sandy has been the boost to her self-esteem and self-confidence. More than 30 years after dropping out of primary school, Sandy is now studying law at university. 'Doing Foodies really changed my life,' she says.

### Delicious marketing

The Central Market in Adelaide is a famous tourist attraction, selling a dazzling array of produce. For Sharyn Spezzano, it has also become a classroom.

Since becoming a Community Foodie, Sharyn, 56, has taken groups on tours of the markets to introduce them to new fruits, vegetables

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and flavours, and the concept of shopping in season. She also takes groups on tours of supermarkets, teaching them to read labels and to get better value for their money, and pointing out the aisles to avoid.

The tours also take in the butcher and the fish shop, to give people the confidence to speak with the butcher and fishmonger, and to ask for advice on cooking and preparation. Sharyn also does demonstrations at community centres and other places, of how to prepare attractively presented, cheap and easy meals.

‘People are under the misconception that “cheap” and “nutritional” can’t be in the same sentence,’ says Sharyn. ‘I had someone asking me to write her a shopping list because she had only \$20 a week to spend on food. You start with the basics: rice and pasta. If you have any sprouting onions or potatoes with eyes, you plant them. People don’t think of things like that these days, because they think food is born in the supermarket.’

Sharyn has got tremendous satisfaction from being a Community Foodie. ‘It’s just wonderful to see people come out of their shells and say, “Hey I didn’t think the family would eat vegies but when I gave them that dish, they came back for more”. They come in beaming about how their family loved the food.’

Most people get their information about food and nutrition from family and friends, so it is not surprising that Sharyn has noticed a ‘trickle-out’ effect—family members, friends, friends of friends and neighbours have made changes to their shopping and cooking.

### **Eat well, feel better**

Joanne Paynter, 40, has noticed an improvement in her family’s physical and mental health since becoming a Community Foodie. She and her 18-year-old son are overweight and at high risk of type 2 diabetes because of a strong family history of it. But since making changes to their food habits—buying more vegetables and fruit and

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fewer foods high in salt, sugar and fat—Joanne has lost weight and discovered that she enjoys regular walks.

Joanne is a single mother living on a disability pension at Port Pirie, so she knows how difficult it can be to make the food budget work every week. 'It's not more expensive to eat healthily,' she says. 'It's just knowing how to do it. I go to the fruit and vegie place first, look for the specials, and try to go to the supermarket when they mark down the bread.'

Now she bakes and grills rather than frying, and is more likely to reach for fruit for a snack. Apart from the health benefits, she finds that she now enjoys food more. 'You just feel much better about yourself when you are eating well and exercising,' she says. 'My son is learning from my example.'

## 5. Eating together

Once it was just accepted that at the end of the day families sat down and broke bread together. These days so many forces have conspired to kill the family meal—television, parents' lack of time and energy, the proliferation of fast food and takeaways, the normalisation of 'eating on the run', longer and longer working hours...the list goes on.

On the other hand, there's also a long list of reasons why it is worth switching off the TV and resurrecting the family meal. Here are a few:

- Families that sit down together for meals tend to have healthier diets. They tend to have more vegetables and fruit and less fatty foods and soft drink. They are also less likely to be overweight.
- Children learn so much at the family dinner table. They learn about food and eating, as well as social skills such as table manners, sharing, and how to have a conversation with people. They learn to listen as well as to speak up.

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- Family meals are a great opportunity for establishing healthy habits—such as having a glass of water or milk with the meal.
- They are also an important opportunity for parental role modelling, so be conscious of how you eat and behave as well.
- Conversations around the table help parents and children keep in touch with each other as well as with the day's events.

For many families, though, mealtimes are full of conflict and tension. Not every family can be *The Brady Bunch* (thank heavens). But everyone will benefit if the family mealtime is as stress-free and as pleasant as possible. Here are a few tips:

- Have structured, regular meals. If mealtimes are predictable, children will be more likely to arrive at the table with an appetite.
- They are also more likely to behave appropriately at the table if they know what is expected of them. Set some family rules for the meal table and apply them clearly and consistently. These might be as simple as saying 'thanks' and 'please' or not making rude comments about food.
- Ignore bad behaviour. Don't reward children for screaming or throwing food by giving them attention.
- Learn from McDonald's. One of the reasons children like going there (and to other similar places) is that the place is associated with pleasant family outings, with having a good time. People are more likely to behave nicely towards each other when they're out in public. See if you can apply the same standards at your home table. If an argument is brewing

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with your partner or another family member, try to resolve it away from the meal table.

- Encourage children to pay attention to what they are eating. Make sure the TV is off and there are no other distractions. Talk about what you are eating, where or how it was grown, how it tastes and smells, its texture. Cultivate the family's interest in food.

- Encourage children to eat slowly by eating slowly yourself. Eating slowly will help you and your children get back in touch with your internal signals of hunger and fullness. And remember, eating quickly is associated with being overweight.

- Stick to the division of responsibility rule. Parents are responsible for ensuring a variety of tasty, healthy foods are available at mealtimes. It will help if these are attractively presented. Children are responsible for deciding what they eat and how much. Don't make a fuss if they refuse food. No healthy child will starve themselves. Remove uneaten food calmly and without comment. Don't then offer a treat.

- Don't cook special meals for children.

- Family meals are an opportunity to support children as they learn to self-regulate how much they eat. Some experts recommend putting food in serving bowls on the table and letting everyone serve themselves; young children will of course need help with this. Research shows that preschoolers are less likely to overeat when they are allowed to help themselves to food.<sup>17</sup> If you are serving out food, remember that parents often expect children to eat more than they need. Don't dish out large portions. It is better to give small amounts and let them have extra if they want it.

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### A fussy eater

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Julie Williams knew all the theory when she had children. She was a dietitian, so she was familiar with the research supporting the division of responsibility and the importance of remaining calm when children refuse food. But her first child, Reuben, was one of the most fussy eaters she had ever seen in her many years of working with families. He just did not want to try any new foods.

‘I had all the theory, but putting it into practice was challenging,’ says Julie, the Co-ordinator of Community Nutrition in the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services. ‘I was really tested, but now I can talk with parents with a lot of empathy.’

She kept reassuring herself with the advice that she was used to telling other parents: no healthy child will starve. As Reuben grew, she learnt to relax and accept that he just did not need as much food as some other children. ‘It was just a consistent, persistent effort,’ she says.

It helped when her next child came along. Milla was an enthusiastic eater, and her example influenced Reuben, who has slowly become more adventurous.

Many parents, when faced with a fussy eater, find that it helps to have someone the child admires set an example. It might be a sibling, cousin, friend or grandparent.

### Finding the pot of gold

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Denise Greenaway became interested in nutrition when working as a school counsellor about 15 years ago. When girls came to her for help, whether about difficulties with their relationships, schoolwork or drugs, she noticed that they usually also had issues with food. Whether

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they were starving themselves or binge-eating, many girls' emotional and physical wellbeing was affected by their unhealthy eating patterns and relationship with food.

Greenaway, a psychologist based at Byron Bay on the north coast of New South Wales, now runs The Rainbow Food—Eating By Colour program, which aims to help young people develop more healthy relationships with food and their bodies. The program encourages children to think of food in colours and to eat as many natural colours as possible every day at every meal. The aim is to make eating a pleasurable, guilt-free experience.

She has become used to hearing gasps of delight when girls emerge from one of her workshops for morning tea. They find a huge table groaning with fruit and vegetables, beautifully arranged in all the colours of the rainbow, and with table decorations made from sculptured produce.

'You make food exciting by presenting it in a way that is visually pleasing,' says Greenaway. 'That's really important to girls. Fresh food, when it is presented well, is psychedelic.' The girls are asked to put something of every colour on their plates and to try at least one food they've never had before. They are told to eat as much as they want. 'The kids love it because they get to choose,' she says.

Greenaway says the rainbow is a fantastic device for engaging children with healthy food, because it is associated with magic and treasure.

The rainbow strategy is helpful for people of all ages. 'It's a wonderful way of reviewing your day, if you just write down how many colours you ate in a day,' she says.

When running workshops for boys, Greenaway takes a different approach to the stories of magic and fairies that she weaves for girls. Her goal with boys is to keep them physically active and engaged while she teaches them to cook porridge, pikelets and other simple meals.

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Parents often are disbelieving when they hear what their children have eaten in Greenaway's workshops. 'I call Rainbow Food a taste recovery program,' she adds. 'Adults have this belief that their children won't eat anything healthy.'

Greenaway's experience suggests otherwise; you just have to make healthy food fun and enticing, she says. And a bit of magic helps too.

(For more information, go to <http://www.rainbowfood.com.au>, or <http://www.mirrormirror.com.au>.)

## The voice of experience

Mary Mallett wants her four children to have more opportunities than she has had. When they grow up, she wants them to be able to run and play with their own children, and to be able to go to the beach or swimming pool without feeling painfully self-conscious.

Mary has been overweight since she was a child, and says it has had a huge impact on her life, affecting even her employment opportunities. She has also missed out on joining in many activities with her children. Weight is such a sensitive subject that Mary struggles to discuss it with even close friends. But recently she has found the courage to talk about her weight publicly, knowing that it lends extra impact to the advice she gives other parents.

Mary, 44, volunteers as a peer educator in Hobart for the Family FoodPATCH program, which aims to help improve families' knowledge and skills around nutrition and food. When she gives talks to parent and community groups, she describes the way her own experience of being overweight made her conscious of the importance of instilling healthy eating habits in young children.

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‘I know that it’s so difficult to lose weight,’ she says. ‘It’s better not to gain it.’ She also knows from personal experience that food preferences which begin in childhood can be difficult to shake. ‘I grew up in Ireland on a dairy farm,’ she says, ‘and I still love butter and cream.’

The most useful skill Mary has learnt as a peer educator is how to read food labels. As a result, she now rarely buys snacks that are high in fat and salt. The family has also changed its takeaway policy, preferring to buy noodle boxes instead of conventional fast foods.

She advises other parents how to deal with the soft drink issue. ‘Once kids get used to drinking soft drinks and cordials, they will often refuse to drink water. But I know from experience that if you stop buying soft drinks and fruit juice and give them water consistently, eventually they are going to have to drink it.’

Mary also encourages parents to learn how to say no to their children, and to be consistent about it. ‘Lots of parents of young children are really reluctant to say no to their children,’ she says. She was shocked to discover, when giving a talk at a local private school, that only 1 out of 24 girls in the Year 3 class had a lunchbox that was completely healthy. It was probably no coincidence that this girl was the daughter of a dentist.

‘It’s just so difficult for parents,’ says Mary. ‘Modern Australian society makes it almost impossible for them to feed their children a healthy nutritious diet.’

## 9. Food and development

It starts from almost the moment they are born. *How much does she weigh? How much has he put on?* Parents—particularly mothers—often feel under intense pressure for their baby to conform to growth and weight expectations. This focus, dating back to the days when under-nutrition was much more common, can have unhealthy consequences today, when overconsumption has become the norm.

Julie Leask, a public health researcher in Sydney, is acutely conscious of the downside of such pressure. Her first child, Billy, 3, has inherited his father's thin build. Julie came to dread his regular weigh-ins at the baby health centre because he was always light for his age. 'Right from when they're born, the focus is on them conforming to this growth chart', she says. 'I felt tempted just to get weight on him, to give him chips rather than the fruit and vegetables that he loves, just to conform to this stupid curve on the chart.'

Julie is also conscious of subtle cultural and social pressures that can make parents' guilt even worse. 'It's as if his being

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thin is a reflection of my ability to nurture and provide for him,' she says, 'even though I know rationally that he's happy and he eats very healthily. There's unlikely to be anything wrong and I'm unlikely to be depriving him.'

Nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton is familiar with stories like Julie's, and she questions whether it is healthy to put so much emphasis on weighing well babies. 'It gives people the idea that big is good,' she says. 'The whole idea that the bigger and faster the baby grows the better it is may be from the days when wealthier people were bigger because they got fewer infections and had better living conditions. The mother is always made to feel there is something wrong with her if her baby isn't gaining weight at the rate someone else suggests. When I was first breastfeeding, in the late 1960s, I was told, "You will never ever be able to feed him with those small breasts."'

The pressure on mothers for their baby to conform to a growth chart can undermine their confidence in their ability to breastfeed, especially as the charts used to monitor growth were originally based largely on bottle-fed babies, who tend to gain weight more quickly than those fed at the breast. Some research suggests that infants who are exclusively breastfed to 6 months are on average 600–650g lighter at 12 months than bottlefed infants of the same height. New charts, based on the growth of breastfed infants, have only recently become available.

Wendy Burge, past president of the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA), believes too much emphasis is put on babies' weight. When she had her first baby, Kate, 20 years ago, she felt undermined by suggestions that her daughter wasn't gaining enough weight. It would have been easy for her to stop breastfeeding. 'It didn't stop me because I was fortunate to have enough support around me to keep going,' she says, 'but I can

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fully understand why women run away from it, because there is far too much pressure. You begin to doubt your own instincts. The ABA is constantly stressing to mothers not to get hung up on weight gain. If there is some weight gain and all the other signs say that your baby is doing well, you're OK.'

## Breastfeeding matters

Breastfeeding is something of a holy cow. There's no doubt about its many likely benefits, for both mother and baby. But the mythology and mysticism that surround it can make it very difficult for women who find breastfeeding a struggle. They can feel like a failure if breastfeeding is not the joyous, natural experience they expect, and can find it hard to acknowledge that they are having problems and get help when they need it.

When the National Health and Medical Research Council published guidelines to promote breastfeeding, it included some personal reflections from a senior nutritionist which highlight some of these issues.<sup>1</sup> She wrote that breastfeeding is like holding down a full-time job—but more physically demanding than most.

'No one ever warned me just how hard it is to get breastfeeding established,' she wrote. 'In my mind I knew that this was the best food for my new baby and certainly the only option as far as convenience was concerned, but I found it quite frustrating (and painful) to learn this new skill at first. It was an eye opener when I realised that the 2 to 3 hours between feeds included the time you took feeding, which meant that sometimes there was a break of less than 1 hour between feeds to get anything else done. I relied a lot on the support and encouragement that I received from community nurses.'

Many couples—whether they are planning, expecting or

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already caring for a baby—could benefit from reading these guidelines: they can be downloaded from the National Health and Medical Research Council website (<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>). They have lots of tips for making breastfeeding easier for all concerned.

On top of all its other benefits, there is mounting evidence that breastfeeding reduces the risk of excessive weight gain during infancy and childhood. There is some evidence that the longer babies are breastfed, the less likely they are to gain too much weight in later years.<sup>2</sup> There is also some limited evidence that babies who start solid foods too early may be at risk of becoming overweight.

There are many theories about why this might be so. These include:

- Bottle feeding encourages parents to take control of how much and how often the baby eats. This may undermine the baby's natural ability to regulate their intake. Breastfeeding helps the baby learn to eat according to their appetite rather than according to external cues.<sup>3</sup>
- Breast milk exposes babies to the flavours of their mother's diet and may make it easier for them to accept a wider range of foods at weaning and as they get older.<sup>4</sup>
- Mothers of breastfed babies have a more relaxed attitude to their toddlers' intake of solid food and their toddlers consequently eat a wider range of solids and are taller and leaner than bottle-fed toddlers.<sup>5</sup>
- Some of the hormones and growth factors in breast milk may affect the body's mechanisms for governing appetite and fullness.

One review of the scientific evidence associating breastfeeding with a reduced risk of later obesity noted that research in the

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area is in its early stages.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that other factors at least partly explain the link: perhaps parents who are committed to breastfeeding are also more likely to regulate TV viewing and to encourage their children to be active, for instance. But many experts are convinced that the link is real and believe that supporting more women to breastfeed for a longer period may help reduce childhood and adolescent weight problems. It's even been proposed that the popularity of infant formula in the 1950s may have contributed to the weight gain occurring amongst many of those now in middle age.<sup>7</sup>

Of course there are plenty of other reasons, apart from weight control, to support breastfeeding. It has both short-term and long-term benefits for mother and baby.<sup>8</sup> It helps mothers bond with their baby and shed excess weight gained during pregnancy, and also may reduce their risk of breast and ovarian cancer. For the baby, it reduces the risk or severity of many health problems, including reflux, respiratory illness, asthma, gastrointestinal disease, inflammatory bowel disease, coeliac disease, type 1 diabetes, otitis media (a middle ear infection), urinary tract infections, bacterial meningitis, sudden infant death syndrome and some childhood cancers. It also helps intellectual development.

### Reality check

#### What is recommended:

In an ideal world, all children would be exclusively breastfed until they are at least 6 months old. This means only breast milk, no solid foods and other liquids, until after 6 months. The National Health and Medical Research Council has set a breastfeeding goal: more than 90

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per cent of babies should be breastfed, and 80 per cent should still be on the breast at 6 months.

### What happens:

- A Queensland survey conducted in 2003 found that 57 per cent of infants were still being breastfed at 6 months.<sup>9</sup> Women who had made a commitment to breastfeed before having their baby were far more likely to do so. The survey also found that 18 per cent of children started solid food before they were 4 months old.
- A NSW study suggests that solids are being introduced too early into the diets of many babies. In 1995, 17 per cent of NSW infants were fully breastfed until 6 months of age (having only breast milk and no solid foods) but this figure had dropped to 5 per cent by 2001.<sup>10</sup> Public health nutritionist Dr Karen Webb says many women are discharged so soon after giving birth that they have not had a chance to learn the basic skills of breastfeeding. 'Support services for new mothers are very effective in extending the duration of breastfeeding, but there are simply not enough of these to help mothers with the steep learning curve they have as new parents,' she says.
- In 2004, a national study found that 37 per cent of babies had started regular solid foods by 4 months.<sup>11</sup> A national survey conducted in 2001 found that just over 50 per cent of babies were exclusively breastfed at 3 months and that only about a third were by 6 months.<sup>12</sup> In 1995 a national survey found that 57 per cent of babies were fully breastfed at 3 months. At 6 months, about 19 per cent were fully breastfed and about 46 per cent were fully or partially breastfed. Still, this is much better than in times past. When the Australian Breastfeeding Association first started in 1964 (when it was known as the Nursing Mothers' Association), only 23 per cent of mothers were breastfeeding on discharge from hospital.

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None of this is meant to suggest that women should whip themselves if they struggle to meet the official recommendations on breastfeeding. It is a little like the obesity problem more generally, where it seems unfair to blame individuals for putting on weight when so many aspects of society encourage this. It is the same with breastfeeding: when employers, workplaces, health services and other powerful societal forces make it difficult for women to breastfeed, why should women be blamed? ‘The mother shouldn’t feel guilty if she can’t manage to breastfeed,’ says Wendy Burge. ‘It’s more likely the support and information that’s failed her.’

One way women can make it easier on themselves is to get informed—the earlier the better. During pregnancy, many couples’ focus is firmly on the birth and delivery, which is not surprising, considering it is such a momentous event. But pregnancy is also the ideal time for finding out about breastfeeding. And if both partners are involved in this, all the better—breastfeeding is more likely to be a success when the father is supportive. Have a look at the Australian Breastfeeding Association’s website and get in touch with your local ABA support group. Read the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines mentioned above. Find out if your hospital is accredited as Baby Friendly (this means you have a better chance of getting the support you need in those critical early days). Some employers are also accredited as being supportive of breastfeeding.

Chapter 15 includes a list of resources to help support breastfeeding. These are not only for women; they are also for their partners, families, health services and employers.

## The pregnancy program

There is mounting evidence that babies' growth and nutrition before birth has a profound influence on their long-term health. Under-nutrition and over-nutrition during pregnancy may increase the risk of excessive weight gain in childhood and later life.

The Barker Hypothesis, named for the work of British researcher David Barker, has focused attention on the importance of nutrition during pregnancy. Barker and others believe that early influences on the developing foetus can produce life-long effects on organ structure and function. They argue that the origins of many adult diseases, including heart disease and non insulin-dependent diabetes, lie in this 'foetal programming'.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the evidence to support this hypothesis comes from the Dutch famine in the winter of 1944/45. The occupying German Army blockaded western Holland during the last 6 months of World War II, causing widespread famine. The official ration for pregnant women provided only about a third of the energy intake generally recommended. Studies following the health of babies born during the famine found that those who were undernourished in the first two trimesters of pregnancy were twice as likely to be obese at age 19 as those who received adequate nutrition during those stages of pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> One possible explanation is that nutritional deprivation during this crucial time influences the regulation of appetite and growth for life. This is supported by experiments showing that rats born to severely undernourished mothers are smaller at birth but have greater appetites than other rats, especially for energy-dense foods. They appear to have been programmed for a life of scarcity—to eat as if every meal was their last.

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The other group influenced adversely by foetal programming appears to be bigger babies born to fatter mothers, or women who develop gestational diabetes during pregnancy. According to Ian Caterson, Professor of Human Nutrition at the University of Sydney, the intrauterine environment may affect their metabolic development in ways that predispose them to future weight gain and diabetes. This increased susceptibility may then be passed on to their own children, setting up a cycle in which future generations face an increased risk of weight-related problems. There is also some evidence that an adverse foetal environment—such as when the mother smokes during pregnancy—may also promote later obesity, independent of any effect on foetal growth.<sup>15</sup>

Caterson says research in the area of foetal nutrition and programming is still in its infancy, but it appears that babies who weigh less than 2.5kg or more than 4kg at birth may be at increased risk of weight gain and associated health problems in later life. While it is too early to make recommendations about how to best influence foetal nutrition and programming, he is in no doubt that pregnancy will prove to be a crucial period for intervention if obesity in childhood and adulthood is to be reduced.

He advises women to maintain fitness and a healthy weight before and during pregnancy. This is particularly important for those having difficulty conceiving; losing even a few kilograms may boost their chances of conception, he says. Smoking during pregnancy is, of course, never a good idea.

## **Different stages, different needs**

Unlike adults, children need to take in more energy than they use in order to keep growing. But their needs around nutrition

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and feeding vary according to their developmental stage. Understanding how these things are connected will make it easier for you to help them establish healthy attitudes and habits. The early years are particularly important for this. There is some evidence that children's nutrition tends to worsen as they get older. One study, for example, found that 9-year-olds tend to have a poorer diet than 5-year-olds.<sup>16</sup> And anyone who knows anything about teenagers won't be surprised to hear that they are particularly likely to have poor nutrition.

### 1. Feeding babies (0–1 year)

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends exclusive breastfeeding until about 6 months, then starting them on iron-enriched infant cereals. Vegetables, fruit, meat, chicken and fish can be added gradually. Babies often give clues when they are ready to start trying solid foods. They may watch and lean forward when food is around, put their fingers in their mouth, move their tongue up and down or reach out to grab food or spoons.

The first solids should be finely mashed and smooth, but you can soon move to coarser mashing. Nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton recommends avoiding sloppy baby foods—this can encourage lack of interest in any food that requires chewing. Even before their teeth emerge, a baby's gums can masticate food that has been mashed or blended. The infant should progress gradually to food chopped into small pieces. When infants begin to pick up everything and put it into their mouth, it is time to give them finger foods with texture. They may suck on them and make a mess, but they will gradually learn how to chew.

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It is generally recommended that by the time babies turn 1, they should be eating much the same foods as the rest of the family.

Babies should not be given fruit juice before 6 months; between 6 months and 6 years they should have no more than about 150ml of fruit juice a day.

Your attitudes and behaviour around your baby's feeding may well influence their attitudes and behaviour around food for many years to come. So it is important to try to make the experience as enjoyable and relaxing as possible for all concerned. According to Ellyn Satter, your baby will feel about eating the same way you feel about feeding them. She compares good feeding with a nicely flowing non-verbal conversation. It is a two-way process where each of you responds to the other's cues. Your focus should not be on getting food into your baby but on observing what your baby wants and responding to those signals.

Children are more likely to eat according to their needs if they stay in control of the feeding process. This doesn't mean that you stop offering foods that they reject. 'I have learnt a lot about normal eating from babies', says Satter.<sup>17</sup> 'In fact I often teach my eating-disordered adolescents and adults about normal eating by talking about how babies do it. Older children are pretty good at eating normally, too, but since they have had time to learn strange ideas and habits from their elders, they aren't as good at it as babies.'

Remember that babies and children have an inbuilt survival mechanism based on rejecting new foods. They need to be exposed to new foods multiple times to learn that they are safe to eat. Some babies might try a new flavour the first or second time it is offered; others may need more than a dozen

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opportunities. Many parents are too quick to give up: one Australian study found that 53 per cent of those with children classified as fussy eaters gave up offering a new food if the child had not accepted it after two or three attempts.<sup>18</sup>

If you only give babies and children what you know they will eat straight away, they will not have the chance to learn to like a wide range of foods. But when you put a new food on their plate, don't make a big deal about it. Don't pressure them to try it until they are ready to do so.

Satter recommends sitting with your child at the family meal table and eating together—start as soon as they are able to sit up at the table in their highchair. This helps them learn by watching what everyone else does. It also helps cement the habit of family meals.

## 2. Feeding toddlers (1–2 years)

Few parents survive the toddler years without at least some food-related angst. It is much easier on all concerned if you can keep this to a minimum. It is easier to do this if you understand toddlers' take on food, life and the universe.

Toddlers are busy exploring their environment and asserting themselves and their independence—'no' becomes one of their favourite words and they continually test their parents' authority. They need a sense of security and routine. As Ellyn Satter says, toddlers are a little like a night watchman, 'checking all the doors but not really wanting to find any open'.<sup>19</sup> Toddlers can be easily upset and need help staying out of unnecessary struggles. Try not to let eating and mealtimes become a stage for struggles.

Food is of great interest to most toddlers—but not always for eating. They tend to be erratic and unpredictable eaters.

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One day they might insist on feeding themselves; the next they will want to be fed. Or they might love a food one day and hate it the next. They might refuse a food at home but devour it when offered it somewhere else. Behaviour that can frustrate or worry a parent is often just normal for a toddler.

Toddlers have a limited attention span but they are very aware of those around them, and are great imitators. They are far more likely to accept and enjoy their food if others around them, whether children or adults, do the same.

Toddlers need room to express their autonomy but they also need structures and limits. 'If you treat him like you did when he was an infant, and simply accept and support his desires, you will fail him utterly,' says Ellyn Satter. 'He needs reasonable and firm limits in order to feel secure.' Toddlers need to know there will be three meals a day with regular snacks between meals. They also need to know how they are expected to behave at the table. This does not mean expecting them to clear their plate or eat tidily. It means offering them the same foods the rest of the family is eating and ensuring that, as much as possible, mealtimes are pleasant experiences. Parents who set limits, says Sattler, usually discover that once the toddler's initial storm is blown over, the child is happier and more settled.

In the second year of life, a child's nutrient needs are still high. It is particularly important to ensure toddlers are having plenty of foods rich in iron. Iron is essential for growth, and for motor and mental development, and the consequences of early iron deficiency may not be completely reversible. The best sources of iron are lean red meat such as beef, lamb, kangaroo or goat. White meats are also good sources, as are baked beans, wholegrain bread, some breakfast cereals and leafy green

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vegetables. Grains, dairy products and meats are important sources of the nutrients sometimes lacking in toddlers' diets.<sup>20</sup>

Restricting children's fat intake in their first few years of life is not a good idea; it may affect their growth and development. The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that reduced-fat dairy products not be given to children younger than 2, and that skim milk not be given to children younger than 5.

### **3. Feeding preschoolers (3–5 years)**

Preschoolers are very busy. They are learning new skills, striving for independence and have boundless energy and endless curiosity. 'Why?' is one of their favourite words. The preschool years are an ideal time for engaging children in the vegetable patch, in the kitchen and in food preparation. They are more likely to learn about food and to be interested in it if they have had a hand in growing or preparing it.

Food fads are common among preschoolers. They may insist on having a certain food prepared a particular way for several days. Then another food will come into vogue. Some parents might see this as a sign of fussiness, but really it is a common stage as children gradually expand their food range.

Preschoolers need routines—meals and snacks at regular times so they can eat small amounts regularly—but their appetite and intake will vary. Many prefer simply prepared foods that they can identify and manage themselves: vegetables or fruit cut into small pieces, for example. Make mealtime a pleasant and social occasion by including them in conversations and engaging them in meal rituals such as passing serving bowls. Using serving bowls helps children learn to regulate their eating. Remember not to pressure or reward them into eating.

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Eating, as Ellyn Satter points out, involves a complex set of skills that are gradually acquired. Preschoolers are good eaters, she says, if they like eating and feel good about it, are interested in food, like being at the table, can wait a few minutes to eat when hungry, rely on internal cues of hunger and fullness to know how much to eat, enjoy many different foods, can learn to like new foods, can politely refuse foods they don't want, can be around new or strange food without getting upset, have reasonable table manners and can eat in places other than home.

Of course children's temperaments also vary. Some will adopt new foods enthusiastically, others will take a slow but steady approach and others will be late bloomers. Don't expect any child to fit neatly into any stereotype of what should happen at different developmental stages.

### Fussy eaters

When children refuse food, it may be nothing to do with their view on the food itself—it may be their way of testing the effect of their response on people around them. If you assume that food is the real issue, you may end being caught up in an unwinnable game. The experts' advice for managing this sort of situation includes:

- Try to stay calm, and don't force your child to eat. Ignore behaviour you don't want to encourage. The more fuss you make, the greater your chances of entrenching your child's fussy behaviour.
- Allow your child some likes and dislikes.
- Start with a small serve and give more if your child is still hungry.

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- If your child refuses to eat anything, let them sit quietly for a few minutes before leaving the table. Let them come to their next meal hungry.
- Do not bribe your child or prepare special food for them.
- Put the food in serving bowls on the table and let everyone help themselves. This way the child has to take responsibility for their choices. Coach other family members not to comment on the child's behaviour but to get on with enjoying their meal.

### 4. Feeding primary school children (6–12 years)

Children's first day at school is a huge milestone on their road to independence. School also often means the start of deterioration in children's eating. Parents have less control over what foods are available to their children, and schools don't always pull their weight in this area. Peer pressure also really starts to kick in.

But parents still have a great deal of influence. There are lots of ways you can affect your children's eating habits. Here are a few:

- Maintain the family habit of breakfast.
- Make sure your children (and their friends) have access to a wide range of healthy food at your home, especially for after-school snacks.
- Build relationships with other parents to try to counter the peer pressure problem. It is so much easier if your child's friends also have healthy snacks in their lunchbox and after school.
- Work with the school community on making healthy food choices available at school (see Chapter 15 for more on how to go about this).

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Lunchboxes are often tricky. Children want whatever their friends are having, and often this means sugar and fat-laden snacks such as muesli bars and crisps. Some experts suggest making a list (help your child if they don't yet write) of all the things they are happy to have for lunch. You decide what is suitable, then try to come up with a list that you both agree on. Try to make sure the list includes plenty of variety.<sup>21</sup> And try to make sure that it does not include processed meats, chips, sweet biscuits, muesli and breakfast bars, fruit bars or straps, cordials, juices or soft drinks (see the Appendices for places to find ideas about making healthy, interesting and varied school lunchboxes; start by having a look at the Lunch Box World resources of the WA charity, Meerilinga, at <http://www.meerilinga.org.au>. And Choice magazine has an online, interactive tool to help with lunchboxes: <http://www.choice.com.au>

## 5. Feeding adolescents

It may seem narky to worry about what teenagers are eating when they have so many other issues to deal with—hormones and their emerging sexuality, annoying parents, irritating siblings, demanding teachers, stressful exams, drugs, alcohol, etc!

But food is a seriously important issue for teenagers. Adolescence is a high-risk period for nutrition. Teenagers have more money and opportunity to develop poor eating habits. Using alcohol and other drugs can also contribute to unhealthy eating patterns.

Good nutrition is critically important at this time, because teenage bodies are still growing and developing, and they need plenty of nutritious fuel. Adolescents are estimated to need about 1000 kilojoules more per day than adults.<sup>22</sup> The National

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Heath and Medical Research Council recommends that teenagers should have 3–4 serves of fruit and 4–9 serves of vegetables each day as well as 4–11 serves of cereal. Adolescence is an important period for calcium absorption and gaining bone density, especially for girls. A number of studies have raised concerns that many teenage girls may not be consuming enough dairy products for their long-term bone health.<sup>23</sup>

Adolescence is also a vulnerable time for putting on weight. Excess kilograms piled on at this stage have a nasty habit of lingering into adulthood. It is probably no coincidence that adolescence is also a time when stress levels in both parents and children rise. Parents' relationships are also particularly vulnerable to strain during children's adolescent years. According to one text, children's self-esteem often starts to fall from about age 11. By the time they turn 15, though, self-confidence starts to improve again.<sup>24</sup> A healthy diet and regular activity will help teenagers cope with their studies and the other stresses in their life.

Parents need to strike the delicate balance of being engaged and present in their teenagers' lives but not overly intrusive or critical. It is never a good idea to be critical of children's weight or body shape, and this is especially so during the adolescent years. Suggesting that adolescents join weight loss programs designed for adults is likely to be harmful—and ineffective.

In fact, you may need to actively discourage dieting. Many girls who have a healthy weight or are even underweight turn to dieting during adolescence. Disordered eating, whether it's binge eating, dieting or even fasting, is very common among teenagers. Studies of teenagers show that dieting is worryingly common, among boys as well as girls; dieting is so common among young women it is almost the norm.

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Try not to do anything that will encourage your teenagers to follow fad diets or obsess about their weight and body shape. They need reassurance that weight gain, changes in body shape and increases in food intake are quite normal at this time. Discuss with them the downsides of dieting—including that it tends to lead to a vicious circle of food restriction and bingeing which ultimately leads to weight gain, not weight loss. Tell them that many women's lifelong battle with weight began with dieting in their adolescent years. If your teenagers are still not convinced, encourage them to see a health professional who can make sensible recommendations about changing eating habits and increasing activity—stay away from 'get thin quick' clinics.

If you are worried about your teenagers' eating habits, try not to just criticise them—it may make the situation worse. Some studies show that teenagers who are criticised about their eating skip more meals and have worse diets than those whose families are more supportive and accepting.<sup>25</sup> Rather than niggling at your teenagers, help make it easy for them to choose healthy foods. If the pantry and fridge are filled with a tempting range of tasty and nutritious snacks, there will be less room for the other sort. Research shows that teenagers are more likely to eat unhealthy foods and to drink soft drinks if that is what is available at home.<sup>26</sup> Equally, they are more likely to eat vegetables and fruit if these foods are readily available at home. Makes sense doesn't it?

If they complain that they're hungry, try buying healthy snacks with a low glycaemic index (GI) rating. Low GI foods take longer to be broken down and absorbed and may help ward off hunger pangs for longer. They tend to be less processed than high GI foods. But a word of caution: just

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because a food has a low GI does not make a food worth buying or eating. Nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton is concerned that the GI rating is sometimes used to promote foods that have dubious nutritional value. 'Chocolate has a low GI but that doesn't make it a useful food for people with diabetes or for those who need to lose weight,' she says.

She also advises giving teenagers more responsibility for buying food and preparing meals for the family. She suggests buying them a present of cooking lessons. Better still, suggest they do a cooking course with their friends.

## 10. Get moving

Remember how excited you were to see your child's first steps? Learning to walk is one of *the* significant milestones for both parent and child. It's pretty ironic that after we celebrate those first faltering steps, the adult world often then conspires to keep children sedentary. So many aspects of modern life—from concerns about safety to parents' busyness and the ever-increasing array of sedentary entertainment—reduce children's movement. In this chapter I hope to help counteract those forces: to give you some motivation and strategies for helping your children do what comes naturally for most—to enjoy being active.

The aim is not to try to turn every child into a sports star or athlete. That sort of approach immediately excludes those who are not interested in sports but who may well have the most to gain by being more physically active. Sport is an important part of many children's lives, but it is only one of the ways in which children can build skills and fitness. 'Team sport for kids who enjoy it is terrific,' says Associate Professor Melissa Wake, of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne. 'But one hour of sport on the weekend plus 80

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hours of inactivity during the week doesn't add up to an active child. Children need to build activity into their everyday lives.'

Focusing on physical activity—which can be everything from playing a game to washing the car—rather than just on sport and exercise creates many more opportunities for children to burn off energy. It also means physical activity can be accumulated in short bursts throughout the day rather than in one long, hard slog. This is more in line with children's natural patterns of behaviour. It is not usual, for most children at least, to spend more than 20 minutes at a time in vigorous physical activity; the more usual pattern is to do short bursts, but lots of them. Taking a broad approach to physical activity also makes it easier to entrench it as part of your family's everyday routines. The goal is to develop the habit of being active every day, whether it is through enjoying a game of tennis or walking to the shop to buy the milk and the paper.

This is especially important because some research suggests that children's fitness is in decline because of falling levels of incidental activity, not because of falling levels of participation in sport or other organised activities. Many children play sport but don't get enough of other forms of activity, things like hanging out the washing, walking to school or playing in the backyard.

Even though this chapter's focus is on supporting and encouraging children being active, it is really adults who are the target. It is adults' attitudes and behaviours that need to change if children are to be given the opportunity to become more active. Research has shown that many parents think their children are more active than they really are, and that parents do not always place a high priority on their children being active.<sup>1</sup> Many factors influence how active children are: where they live, their genetic makeup (whether they are naturally

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energetic or lethargic, or have a calm or agitated personality, for example), and the school they go to. But many parents may not realise just how important they can be in influencing their children's activity levels. Parents can play a key role in helping their children develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours that support an active lifestyle.

### **Activity matters**

In recent years, health authorities in many countries have issued guidelines encouraging children and adolescents to be more physically active. This has been something of a challenge for the experts involved in developing these guidelines, because there has been surprisingly little research on the impact of physical activity during childhood to help them. The scientific evidence on the benefits of regular physical activity is clear for adults—it reduces the risk of many diseases and adds years to life (as well as life to years). But with children it is far more difficult to show such an impact, partly because serious diseases are rare in childhood. Few experts feel there is sufficient scientific evidence to make definitive pronouncements about the likely effects of any particular level of activity on children's current or future health.

However, common sense suggests that many children could benefit from being more active. One recent review noted the lack of studies documenting the effects of physical activity in childhood, but concluded:

Considering the dramatic rise in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Australian children and adolescents over the last decade and the importance of physical inactivity in the development and maintenance of

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childhood and adolescent obesity, one could argue that it has never been more important to promote regular health-enhancing physical activity among our nation's youth.<sup>2</sup>

Here are some of the potential benefits of activity for children:

### **1. Healthy growth and development**

Physical activity is important for the healthy growth and development of children's bones, muscles and cardiorespiratory system. Weight-bearing activities such as running and soccer are particularly important for developing bone density, which reduces the risk of osteoporosis in later life. Being active helps the development of flexibility, posture, balance, co-ordination and other skills. It also helps bring a good night's sleep and aids in regulating appetite.

### **2. Psychological and mental health**

Active people are likely to feel more confident, happy and relaxed, and to have higher self-esteem. Physical activity can help ward off depression and relieve stress. Some studies suggest that adolescents who are active or play sport are less likely to smoke cigarettes, to drink alcohol or to use illicit drugs. The situation may change as they get older, however. Some research suggests that young adults may be more likely to drink if they are involved in sport. Perhaps this is connected to the alcohol industry's close association with sport.<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Social skills**

Physical activity can promote the development of social skills and connections. Involvement in sport and other activities can help teach children about fair play, teamwork, discipline,

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competition and achievement. It can also help develop skills in goal setting, problem solving, conflict resolution, risk management and leadership. It may also help children learn to delay gratification and tolerate discomfort, which are helpful skills for dealing with the world at large.<sup>4</sup>

### **4. Potential academic benefits**

Some studies suggest that increasing children's fitness boosts their academic achievement. However, not all experts are convinced; some argue that most of the evidence comes from small studies. Nonetheless, many people feel, through their own experience, that regular activity helps improve concentration, focus, thinking and energy.<sup>5</sup> At least one Australian study has shown that introducing compulsory daily physical education improved primary school children's behaviour in class.<sup>6</sup> 'Parents and teachers might say that cuts into the school day,' says Professor Terry Dwyer, one of the researchers involved in that study and now the director of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne. 'But our argument is that historically it's very unusual to have children sitting for 6 hours a day. It's not a natural state.'

### **5. Maintaining a healthy weight**

Children are less likely to gain excess weight if they are physically active. And of course increasing activity levels is a key strategy for helping overweight and obese children reach a more healthy weight.

### **6. Reducing future disease risks**

There is mixed evidence about whether active children are less likely to develop problems such as type 2 diabetes and heart

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disease in later life.<sup>7</sup> Some studies suggest that this might be the case; others do not. More conclusive answers will have to come from large, long-term studies. However, there are plenty of reasons why such studies might be expected to prove that there is a link. The process of atherosclerosis—the hardening of the arteries that can eventually lead to heart attacks and strokes—begins in childhood. Many risk factors for adult diseases, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and insulin resistance, begin early in life. So it makes sense to assume that an active childhood may give some protection against later disease.

### **7. Influencing attitudes and habits**

It is not certain whether children and teenagers who are fit and active are more likely to grow into fit, active adults.<sup>8</sup> Many other factors also influence adults' fitness and activity levels, and there are no doubt many middle-aged couch potatoes who were sports enthusiasts as kids. However, it seems sensible to assume that children who develop the habit, skills and confidence to be active will also have these resources at their disposal in later years.

### **8. Social benefits**

Getting children and young people involved in enjoyable physical activity may also bring community benefits, including increased social cohesion.<sup>9</sup> Criminologists have long been interested in the possibility that participation in sport and activity might help prevent antisocial and criminal behaviour. A recent discussion paper by the Australian Institute of Criminology concludes that such programs may have an indirect effect on antisocial behaviour, by encouraging

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young people's personal and social development.<sup>10</sup> The paper says that sport and physical activity provide a socially acceptable outlet for tension and energy, and may help reduce behavioural risk factors for youth. 'The current consensus in the literature on boredom is that when youth have nothing else to occupy and sufficiently stimulate them they will seek out their own, often antisocial, amusement,' the paper says. 'Providing structured activities keeps young people occupied and out of harm's way.'

### **And some possible downsides...**

Pushing children into sports or activities they do not enjoy or which are beyond their capabilities is not a smart move. It can lead to injuries or affect their self-esteem and confidence, and might even result in a lifelong aversion to physical activity. Encouraging children to be active in order to lose weight, or being overly controlling of their activity, may also be counterproductive. They are more likely to persist with an activity if they enjoy it for its own sake.

Injuries are relatively common with many popular sports. One NSW study found that 54 per cent of young people who play sport experienced some form of injury in a 6 month period. Rugby union, rugby league, netball, hockey, AFL, soccer and horse-riding produced the most injuries.<sup>11</sup>

But the risk can be minimised with a bit of forethought and preparation. Coaches, parents and others involved in supervising children's activities can help reduce the risk of injuries and accidents by making sure children have and use the right equipment, and use it correctly. Children should be encouraged to eat lightly about 2 hours before any vigorous activity, and to keep topped up with water before and during

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exercise. They shouldn't wait to feel thirsty before they take a drink of water.

The idea that doing some stretches before you exercise can help prevent injury is controversial, but many experts believe it is worth recommending. Stretching after exercise is certainly a good idea. So encouraging children to do some warm-up and warm-down exercises may help prevent injury, and will also cultivate an awareness of safety issues. Getting children in the habit of thinking about preparation and safety may have other long-term benefits too.

Some sports and activities which emphasise body image and leanness, such as ballet, aerobics and gymnastics, can lead to an unhealthy focus on weight and body image. They are also associated with a higher rate of inappropriate weight loss practices such as dieting. Such image-conscious activities can also affect some children's self-esteem.<sup>12</sup> The point is not to discourage children from being involved in these activities—just be aware of these issues and take steps to prevent or manage them.

## Reality check

### What is recommended:

- Children and young people should be physically active for at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) every day, according to Australian Government recommendations for children aged 5 to 18. Activity does not need to happen all at once; it can accumulate during the day.
- The same guidelines recommend that children should not spend more than 2 hours a day using electronic media for entertainment (such as computer games, the internet, TV),

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particularly during daylight hours.

- In the United States, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education has made more specific recommendations for different age groups:

- *Infants* should interact with parents and other carers in daily physical activities that help them explore their environment and facilitate their movement. They should be put in safe places that facilitate activity and do not restrict movement for prolonged periods of time.

- *Toddlers* should spend at least 30 minutes each day in structured activity. This does not need to be all at once, but can accumulate during the day. They should also engage in at least 60 minutes and up to several hours of unstructured physical activity every day and should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time except when asleep. They should have safe indoor and outdoor areas where they can be active.

- *Preschoolers* should accumulate at least 60 minutes of structured physical activity each day, and engage in at least 60 minutes and up to several hours of unstructured activity every day. They should not be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time except when sleeping, and should have safe indoor and outdoor areas where they can be active.

- Canada takes a slightly different angle. It advises all children to spend more time being active and less time being sedentary, and recommends taking a stepped approach, boosting activity levels gradually over a 5 month period. To start with, children should spend another 20 minutes each day on moderately energetic activities and another 10 minutes on vigorous activities. They should also start by reducing the amount of time they spend being sedentary by 30 minutes a

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day. By the end of 5 months, they should be accumulating at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity each day and 30 minutes of vigorous activity. They should also have reduced sedentary time by 90 minutes.

## What happens

There is not much reliable information about the physical activity levels of Australian children. Some studies examine only participation in sport or rely on children's or parents' reports rather than on an objective assessment.

The best national figures date back to 1985, when only 38–51 per cent of boys (depending on age) and 35–44 per cent of girls reported 3–4 bouts per week of sustained vigorous activity (defined as enough to make them 'huff and puff').

Other findings, from Australian Sports Commission publications, include that:

- About 62 per cent of children aged 5 to 14 participated in organised sport outside school hours in the 12 months before April 2003: swimming, outdoor soccer and netball were the most popular.
- During the same period, 62 per cent of children rode a bike (down from 64 per cent in 2000), and 23 per cent went skateboarding or rollerblading (down from 31 per cent in 2000).
- Almost a quarter of 15 to 24-year-olds reported doing no physical activity at all in the 2 weeks before a 1995 survey.

Associate Professor Tim Olds, a researcher at the University of South Australia, says children's fitness around the world generally improved between the end of World War II and about 1975. This reflected, among other things, improvements in child health due to reductions in diseases. But in developed countries

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like Australia, children's fitness has declined rapidly since then to levels that are now below pre-war levels. Professor Olds estimates that about half the fall-off in fitness is due to increases in fatness; falling activity levels also play a part.

Children today are generally less fit than children of similar weight and fatness 20 years ago, his research suggests. 'I am sure that most experts now accept that children's fitness is declining', Professor Olds says. 'Your kids are likely to be 10 to 15 per cent less fit than you were at the same age. It's pretty dramatic. It means they simply won't be able to do a lot of things. They will be excluded from a lot of life's experiences.'

## **Why parents are crucial**

### **1. Rethinking some attitudes**

If you can't get a park close to the shops or train station, do you moan and groan? Or do you welcome the opportunity to fit another 10 minute walk into your day? If it's raining, do you shelve plans for a walk—or do you grab the raincoat and broly? At work or the shopping centre or the hotel, do you automatically take the lift, or do you look for the stairs first?

We have all become so used to labour-saving devices and clock-watching that many of us have been programmed into some unhealthy habits. Changing these habits means changing attitudes. Instead of seeing a longer walk to the carpark or a climb up the stairs as a waste of precious time, look at it as an opportunity to improve your precious health. Tweaking your attitudes like this may also help reduce stress levels. It's not only because exercise helps relieve stress or that the time spent walking is also time you can spend thinking, or problem solving, or daydreaming and losing sight of the clock. It's also because

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you have turned a negative into a positive. With this change of attitude, your day might well send you fewer annoyances.

The other important spin-off to changing your attitudes is that it is likely to rub off on the people around you. Children are more likely to create and enjoy opportunities for activity if you do too.

Many parents feel that they just don't have the time to be more active. What they really mean, according to Heart Foundation expert Trevor Shilton, is that being physically active is not a high priority for them. If it was, they would make time. Shilton points out that Prime Minister John Howard can find time to walk every day: 'I challenge anyone to say he's not busy.'

If parents make physical activity a high priority for themselves and their family, it is likely to result in all sorts of changes which will make it easier for children to be more active.

It could mean:

- changes to parents' working or transport arrangements;
- asking schools not only about their academic performance, but also about what they do to encourage students' activity;
- adding another dimension to discussions about where children should go to school, especially if one option involves a long drive and less opportunity for walking to school or playing with friends in the afternoon;
- changes to how your family travels on outings or what you do on weekends and during holidays;
- different types of presents at Christmas and birthdays—fewer computer games and more active games;
- changes to how you reward your children—perhaps taking them on a family bike ride rather than an outing to a fast food restaurant;

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- changing the venue for children's birthday parties—instead of meeting at a fast food restaurant, meet at a park;
- turning off the TV and computer when your kids' friends come over to play; and
- something as simple as putting on some energetic music when you're all doing household chores, to get those bodies pumping.

Making physical activity a priority may also lead to a re-examination of adults' attitudes towards children's behaviour. So many aspects of society are geared towards immobilising children. TV screens have been introduced to cars and shopping centres because it is convenient for adults to keep children quiet and entertained. Are you in the habit of telling the kids to stop fidgeting, to stop running, to sit quietly? It's fair enough to not want them running amok through the house, or all the way to the other end of the shopping mall, but are there areas, inside and out, where they can run unrestrained and be boisterous?

For many parents, one of the most challenging areas for self-examination involves attitudes about children's safety. Today's parents are much more safety conscious and restrictive of their children's activities than previous generations were. It's not surprising considering the constant media diet of doom and gloom and the many groups that have an interest in making us anxious. One of the latest examples of how parental fears can be turned into profit is a new system allowing parents to track their children's whereabouts by mobile phone.<sup>13</sup> We are more aware of the risks in our lives than ever before, even though many of these risks are lower now than they used to be.

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How you weigh up the pros and cons of various risks is a matter for your family. Everyone will have their own particular perceptions of risk, and their own list of how dangerous or safe various activities are. It can't be assumed that there is a 'right way' or a 'wrong way' here—people's perceptions vary according to their world view, their situation and their experience. But it's worth at least thinking through some of your attitudes and seeing if there is any room for movement. It might be as simple as rethinking your approach to a cold or drizzly day. Instead of seeing the weather as a reason to stay indoors, you might see it as a reason to rug up and enjoy a windswept walk along the beach or as a great opportunity to give your kids the pleasure of jumping in puddles or making mud pies.

When public health researcher Professor Boyd Swinburn moved to Australia from New Zealand several years ago, he noticed a greater tendency here to 'cotton wool' kids. He empathises with parents' concerns about risk but believes kids need to be allowed, up to some point at least, to follow their natural tendency to take risks. 'It's about how much you can hold your tongue and avoid saying no,' he says. Mothers, in particular, often find this difficult, he adds.

Girls are especially vulnerable to parents' concerns about risks, according to Geraldine Naughton, Associate Professor in Paediatric Exercise Science at the Australian Catholic University. Research has shown that gender differences in perceptions about risk are established as early as age 6, when girls are much more responsive than boys to parental concerns about hazards associated with play. Parents walk a fine line between exposing their children to unnecessary risks of injury and developing attitudes that constrain their children's activity.

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Rethinking your attitudes to risk may bring other benefits for your children. Learning to negotiate risk is an important part of development. 'Every time you get a kid to take a healthy risk, you are giving them the opportunity to learn a little bit about themselves,' says Dr Michael Carr-Gregg.

### **2. Model that move**

It's not only your attitudes that influence your children, of course. It's what you do, too. Children are more likely to be active if their parents are. They are also less likely to be overweight if their parents are active.<sup>14</sup> So it's worrying to see so many inactive adults. Estimates vary among studies, but it is likely that about half of all adults are not active enough to benefit their health.<sup>15</sup>

You can put this another way: many parents are not active enough to benefit their children's health. Parents can really help their children become more active if they build more activity into their own life. Even better if that activity also involves the children. Maybe you can walk to school together or, with older children, go to the gym or pool together. Or make it a regular weekend event to go on a family bike ride or bushwalk or roller skating or kite-flying. If you are going on a sedentary outing, such as a trip to the movies, can you incorporate some activity: walking to the bus or parking some distance away from the cinema?

Start the habit early. Take babies and toddlers for walks in their prams. That way they will be used to seeing you active from their earliest days. When they can manage, encourage them to walk part of the way. As they get older, get them to cycle while you walk or cycle.

Many people find it easier to be active if they've got

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company. Having a friend to share your walk with is pleasant; it also makes it more difficult to skip that appointment with your runners. Similarly, it might help to find other families who also enjoy being active. Anything that makes activity more enjoyable for all concerned is a good idea.

It is not only parents who can be powerful role models: grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, family friends, teachers, coaches and others who play a significant part in children's lives can also set active examples.

### 3. Psychological support

Children are more likely to participate in sport and other physical activities if they feel confident about their skills and abilities—if they believe they can do it. They are also more likely to be active if they think it will be a positive experience or bring benefits, such as having time with friends.<sup>16</sup>

Parents can help by encouraging children and praising their efforts. Young children, in particular, flourish in front of an audience. Watch them on the sports field or in the backyard, and be generous with your feedback. Children are more likely to be active if they think they are competent and if they believe their parents think they are competent.<sup>17</sup> Praise their efforts in games and sports, whether they win, lose or draw. If they are interested in a particular activity or sport, take them to a professional match or find a book about it.

Give them the opportunity to try a range of different activities, so they can find something they like. Make sure they are involved in activities appropriate to their age and ability. Pushing children beyond their abilities or into activities they do not enjoy is counterproductive. Some children thrive on competition, for instance, but many do not. Many will enjoy

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activity more if it does not involve competition and everyone has a chance to experience the buzz of success.

When children and adolescents are asked about what stops them being more active, they mention things like lack of time and energy, poor weather, homework, and lack of interest and motivation.<sup>18</sup> Parents can help children overcome these sorts of barriers, for example, by helping their children to manage their time better, so they can fit in both their homework and a game outside. Or kill a few birds with one stone—talk through homework or practise spelling while taking a walk together.

Girls may need different approaches from boys. One study of Year 6 children showed that boys were more likely to be active if they were involved in community-based organisations, but girls were more likely to be active if it had benefits such as spending more time with friends. The researchers emphasised the importance of providing opportunities that meet children's needs and interests.<sup>19</sup> Research has also suggested that boys are more active than girls because they are more confident in their ability to overcome barriers to physical activity. The researchers speculated that girls may be less active because they are not given the same encouragement and support as boys. They may also need to learn the behavioural skills that will let them overcome the everyday barriers to participation in physical activity. The researchers suggested that girls should be given plenty of opportunity to participate in non-competitive activities they can enjoy throughout their lives, such as walking, callisthenics/resistance training and aerobic dance.<sup>20</sup>

Special care may be needed when children are overweight. They tend to be less confident of their ability to be physically active. They may need more support and encouragement than other children—but it is important that it is not coercive. One

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study concluded that the best way to encourage obese children to be more active is to provide enjoyable, developmentally appropriate activities that let them experience success with a minimum of anxiety. It also found that obese children are encouraged to get moving by watching influential others—parents or peers—being active.<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, children should not be made to feel that the goal of activity is weight loss; they should be encouraged to be active because it is fun and it will help them feel good.

### 4. Practical support

Many studies have shown that children are more likely to be physically active if their parents give them practical support.<sup>22</sup> This support can take many forms:

- Ensure there are safe places, whether inside or outside, at home or elsewhere, for activity.
- Provide appropriate equipment. This might be as simple as a ball. Or it might mean installing a trampoline or basketball hoop in the backyard. Some families find it useful to store balls and other games equipment in the car so they can be ready for action whenever an opportunity arises. The more items of sporting equipment a family has, the more likely the child is to be active.
- Do what is needed so that your children can participate in sports and other activities—drive them to weekend games, pay their registration fees, make sure they have the correct equipment and uniforms.
- Make sure that when they meet up with friends, they have opportunities to be active.
- Have a stock of suggestions ready for when you hear, ‘I’m bored.’

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- Plan ahead. Identify events which might be of interest to the children and incorporate them into the family schedule. If your children are passionate about a particular sport or activity, take them to professional games or performances or buy them books or magazines about that activity.

## 5. Authority figures

Parents can help children be active by setting some rules, and not just about the amount of time spent in front of a screen. Many studies have shown that children who spend more time outdoors are more active. It's so much easier to be sedentary indoors. Sending children outside to play is a very simple way to get them moving. There are other good reasons to encourage kids to explore the great outdoors; it is thought that the increasing incidence of allergic diseases may be due to the sterilisation of childhood—children being kept indoors and having minimal exposure to the germs that help their immune systems to develop.

Setting some rules to encourage outdoor time is a good idea. Make it a habit, for example, for the family to spend at least one weekend day or half day outdoors. Involve the children in household chores such as gardening, sweeping or walking the dog. And don't forget the sun protection.

## Rethinking home

People use many criteria when they choose where to live—how close it is to the train station or school or family, or how much it costs could be on that list.

Another issue you should perhaps consider is whether your home will make it easy for you and your children to be active. If it is a house,

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does it have a backyard? Research shows a correlation between the size of a backyard and a child's level of activity: the bigger it is, the more active the child is likely to be.<sup>23</sup>

If you are considering moving to a unit, is there a courtyard where the children can play?

Can they walk to school? Does the local neighbourhood encourage activity—can you walk to the shops or the library or the doctor's surgery? Are there cycle ways?

Even the way the streets are laid out can influence your family's ability to be active. A grid network makes it easier to walk to the shops or other destinations; cul de sacs can discourage this. On the other hand, some families prefer to live on a cul de sac because they feel it makes it safer for children to play on the street. Denser development can create a residential area which also supports shops, cafés and other services that are walkable destinations.

Is there a park nearby? A Perth study found that people were more likely to be active if they had access to large, attractive public open spaces. This was particularly so if such spaces were designed for a range of uses—walking, cycling, dog-walking, picnicking and games, for example. It found that people who used public open spaces were nearly three times as likely as other residents to achieve recommended levels of activity.<sup>24</sup> Another Australian study found that people were more likely to use parks, and to use them more often, if they lived within 500 metres of one.

Of course affordability is a key criterion for most families when selecting where to live. But Associate Professor Billie Giles-Corti, a public health researcher at the University of Western Australia, believes that if more attention were paid to the factors that influence physical activity, many parents might see their options quite differently. Choosing an activity-friendly place to live will not necessarily cost more, she says.

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### Balancing risks

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As a public health professional, Glenn Austin is familiar with the idea of weighing up benefits and risks. Rationally, he knows that public fears about ‘stranger danger’ are sometimes exaggerated and often lead to restrictions on children’s ability to be active. But now that he has three young daughters, he has quite a different perspective on the issue. No matter how small the actual risk is of his girls being abducted or injured if they play in the streets, it is not one he wishes to take.

However, Glenn, a former teacher who now works in health promotion in the central Queensland city of Rockhampton, is also determined not to expose his children to the risk of inactivity. His solution has been a backyard landscaped to provide plenty of interesting play areas, including a bicycle track and a cubby house. There’s also an outdoor entertaining area to make it easier for adults to keep an eye on the kids.

Not everyone has the space or the money to create a backyard fun park. But even simple measures—like turning part of the lounge room or the spare room into an activity den for vigorous play or sharing supervision at the park with other parents—can help protect children from the often under-appreciated risk of inactivity.

### Rethinking cars

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Here’s another one of those paradoxes: you might have to slow down to get you and your family moving faster. Cars are so much part of the Australian way of life that we tend to take them, and their impact on our children and cities, for granted.

Taking some time out to reconsider your transport needs and arrangements could pay large dividends if it leads to less car use and

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greater reliance on active forms of transport, such as cycling and walking. Most people, even those who identify as environmentally conscious, don't base their transport decisions on health or environmental considerations. Research shows that time constraints, habit and practical issues are the major influences.

If you want to make some changes to how often you use the car, maybe you could start by trying to think of strategies that might help make active travel more practical and efficient for your family. You need to be realistic about your goals and how to achieve them.

You might also be surprised by how easy it is to make changes. When Perth researchers conducted a study, simply telling residents in one suburb about the active transport options that were available to them, there was a significant drop in car travel and an increase in walking, cycling and use of public transport. The changes were sustained over two years.<sup>25</sup> Similar results have been achieved with Travel Smart programs elsewhere. So it is not impossible to make changes to how you travel. A little bit of information and planning may be all you need.

It might also help to work out how much your car/s cost, taking into account much more than the price at the bowser. Many people overestimate the advantages of car use and underestimate the disadvantages.<sup>26</sup> Some researchers use the concept of 'effective speed' to capture the true cost of cars to motorists. While most people probably think of speed as the distance travelled divided by the time taken, the notion of effective speed also incorporates into this equation the time taken to earn the money to pay all the costs associated with car travel. Taking this approach can throw a whole new light on the benefits of car travel.

One study compared the effective speeds for one person driving a car, travelling by bus, cycling or walking in Canberra. The effective speed ranged from 14.6km/h for a Monaro to 12.8km/h for a

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Landcruiser Sahara, 23.1km/h for a Hyundai Getz, 21.3km/h for a bus, 18.1km/h for a bicycle, 37.1km/h for a train (using Perth data for comparison) and 6km/h for walking. The study was based on 2004 data and included only the costs to the individual of each form of transport—it didn't take account of other costs such as greenhouse emissions or pollution.<sup>27</sup> 'The most important thing we need to do in changing our culture is to slow down and to realise the absolute futility of trying to save time with cars,' says one of the study's authors, Dr Paul Tranter, a senior lecturer in geography at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. For most car drivers, how fast they drive makes little difference to their effective speed because they spend so much time earning money to pay for all the costs of their transport. However, for people using a bus, train or car, any increase in trip speed is reflected in a significant increase in effective speed.

Many adults also fail to consider the effect of their car use on children—whether their own family or others—in making roads and neighbourhoods unsafe for children. In Canada, researchers showed that parents became more open to reducing car use when told about the impact of cars on children.<sup>28</sup> Questioning your car use may help children in many ways. If you start to look for other forms of transport, especially on those short trips when cars are so often used, your children may be less likely to grow up thinking that cars are the only way to travel. If they get in the habit of walking to the shops or school with you, they will also have the chance to learn much more about their environment.

Tranter and his colleagues argue that being able to play in the streets has many benefits for children.<sup>29</sup> They cite Denmark, which has recognised the importance of having streets available for children to play in and designated some as 'rest and play' streets. In Munich, some streets have signs saying 'children can play in this street' and require cars to travel very slowly. 'If children are allowed to play on the streets,

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walk around their own neighbourhood, get to know their own city and community, then when they do become adults, they may be less inclined to defend the levels of motorised traffic which are limiting children's access to their environment,' say the researchers. 'If we can encourage more people to use residential streets for walking, cycling, social interaction and playing, then cities will become more sociable, more liveable places for all city residents.'

A Brisbane inventor, David Engwicht, has developed some ideas for making the streets safer, which at first might sound counterintuitive. In his book *Mental Speed Bumps: The smarter way to tame traffic* (2005), he recounts noticing that a child playing on the footpath could be more effective than a speed bump at slowing traffic. Intrigued, he investigated further and concluded that the speed of traffic on residential streets is governed, to a large extent, by the degree to which residents have psychologically retreated from their street. Simply reversing this retreat creates what Engwicht calls 'mental speed bumps'. His book also describes how a traffic engineer working in Holland, Hans Monderman, made a similar discovery at the same time. Monderman found that removing all traffic signs, speed humps, line markings and traffic lights dramatically reduced traffic speeds and actually made streets safer. The lack of signs and traffic control devices created a mental speed bump that slowed motorists, without their even being aware that they had slowed down. This new approach to street design has been applied in over 30 cities and villages in Europe.

Even if you do not have control over the design of your street or neighbourhood, you may be able to help make it safer by encouraging street life. Hold a street party, or leave the car at home on your next outing.

Some state, local and territory governments have Travel Smart programs which offer advice to help you plan car-free journeys (see

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Appendices for contact details). The active marketing of such programs in a variety of suburbs and towns has led to reductions in car use and increases in walking and cycling.

Some schools and organisations run courses to help parents and children become more confident with cycling. Your local cycling organisation may be able to help with details of these.

Dr Chris Rissel, a cycling enthusiast and public health expert at the Sydney South West Area Health Service, advises parents to start off with recreational cycling—taking the kids somewhere safe to build up their skills and confidence.

Even in a city like Sydney, which is notorious for being car-centred, a little bit of research will turn up many routes offering opportunities for safe cycling, says Rissel.

## Trapping an expert<sup>30</sup>

Dr Paul Tranter, senior lecturer in geography at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra, is passionate about the harm being done by society's unquestioning reliance on cars. In his research and his lectures to students, he unpicks the many hidden costs of car ownership and usage.

But he knows how easy it is to fall into the car trap. He almost did it himself a few years ago, when he started a new job which involved an hour-long commute (each way) by bicycle or bus. He and his wife considered buying a second car so he could squeeze more work into his day.

'While we were looking for a car I recalled a lecture I had given to my transport geography students...and I reflected on just how little time, if any, I would save by getting a second car, and about how I might be able to use my time in a bus, and decided I could save more

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time by continuing to bus it to work and paying for an occasional taxi when I needed to get home quickly in the evenings.'

He also thought about how the bus allowed him some time for work as well as some exercise (walking to the bus stop). 'As a bus commuter I lose less "effective time" than I do as a car driver,' he says. 'I also arrive at work less stressed than the driver who has dealt with peak hour traffic. Leaving aside the environmental and social arguments in favour of public transport, I can now see that catching the bus gives me more time to complete the tasks I need to do.'

If you do these sorts of sums on your car habits, you too might discover some downsides that you hadn't previously seen, as well as some benefits to other forms of travel that you hadn't previously thought about.

## Play on

When children play, they are having fun. But they are also learning—about themselves and their world—and developing their physical, intellectual, emotional and social skills.

And they are burning up energy. Many experts believe that giving children plenty of opportunity for spontaneous play is one of the keys to making sure they are active enough to prevent weight problems emerging. Some research suggests that children use up more energy in active free play or unstructured play outdoors than they do in other kinds of physical activity.<sup>31</sup> One US study, for example, found that preschool children were more active in their free play than in structured activities.

Play is particularly important in the first 10 years of a child's life, when they are too young for sport, according to Associate

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Professor Beth Hands, a human movement expert at the University of Notre Dame in Western Australia. Pushing children into sport before about age 10 can be counterproductive, she says, because they often don't have the skills or confidence to cope with the challenges involved, and the experience can put them off. 'So many children are burning out from starting sport too early,' Hands says. 'They start playing football at 6, and by 9 or 10 they are burnt out.'

Hands also cautions parents against filling up every minute of their children's day with activities. It's better, she says, to just make sure children have the time and opportunity to develop their skills and to entertain themselves with physical play.

However, many children do not get to do this. One study of Year 5 students in western Sydney in 2003 found that about a quarter of the children reported having no or a minimal amount of time for free play after school during the 3 days of the study.<sup>32</sup> Only about half the children spent more than an average of 30 minutes a day in free play. They were otherwise occupied—with homework, structured activities and the mesmerising screen.

After school and weekends are critical times for children's play, and variety in venue and activity are also important. Dr Paul Tranter has studied how different environments influence children's play, and says that many parks, playgrounds and school yards serve children poorly.<sup>33</sup> Rather than neatly manicured lawns and gardens, children need a range of environments, so that they get involved in a range of activities. They need access to spaces where they can be with friends, solitary places where they can be alone, and wild places where they can get dirty, whether by digging holes or making hideaways.

## Get moving

Apart from ensuring that children have time and space for play, one of parents' most important jobs is to play with their children, especially in those formative years. A parent's praise and approval has almost magical properties for young children. Children are more likely to be active if their parents play with them regularly.<sup>34</sup>

The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect offers the following tips to help parents be good playmates:

- Play at the right level for your child. Play that is too easy might bore your child, and play that is too hard may frustrate them.
- Let your child lead the play. Don't take over.
- Make sure the play is safe.
- Ask your children what they would like you to do as part of the play.
- Allow enough time for play.
- Don't compete with young children.
- Be patient if your child wants to repeat the same play over and over. New skills require lots of practice. Stay enthusiastic.
- Appreciate and encourage their efforts.

Associate Professor Geraldine Naughton, an expert in children's exercise science at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney, says that the parents' role as partners in their child's activities gets smaller as the child gets older and more independent. 'But the role of the parent as a facilitator of activity never stops,' she adds.

One of the easiest ways to get young children moving is to have their friends over to play.

## **Developing skills**

Like most people, children are more likely to do activities they enjoy. They are more likely to enjoy an activity if they feel competent at it. So helping children develop the skills to master activities is an important part of helping them to be active.

When young children play, they are also developing the fundamental movement skills that will let them play sport and do other activities later.

Parents have an important role in supporting children's acquisition and development of these skills. This is especially so during the preschool and primary school years, when children are very open to learning new skills, have not yet developed bad habits, are not very self-conscious, and are not as worried as they will be later about being injured or teased by their peers.

Taking time to help children develop their skills and confidence in things like running, jumping, throwing a ball and using a bat may pay long-term dividends. Some researchers believe being confident with these skills plays an important role in preventing unhealthy weight gain among children and youth.

Children who master these skills early are more likely to be active throughout childhood and into adolescence, research shows. They are also more likely to be fit and less likely to carry excess weight.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, those who lack fundamental movement skills are more likely to become frustrated and have difficulty learning more advanced skills. They also are less likely to be fit and active, and more likely to be overweight. They are also more likely to suffer the consequences of public failure, including ridicule and humiliation, which may also

## Get moving

discourage their future involvement in physical activity.<sup>36</sup> 'Humans don't do things they are not successful at,' says Jeff Walkley, Associate Professor in the School of Medical Sciences at RMIT in Melbourne. 'They tend to prove their competence in an area and stick with it, and avoid and reject activities which lead to failure and frustration.'

It can become a vicious circle. Poor skills may lead to low levels of activity, which lead to weight gain, which discourages activity, which reduces the opportunity to improve skill levels. Studies suggest that many Australian children are trapped in this unhealthy cycle.<sup>37</sup> A 1997 study of NSW primary and high school students found that, with the exception of one skill, no more than 40 per cent of students were proficient in all aspects of any of the skills that were assessed. Boys generally performed better than girls.

Girls may benefit if they get some extra attention from parents, coaches or teachers on their skills and confidence.<sup>38</sup> Such help might be particularly useful for adolescent girls. 'Even small increases in skill proficiency could increase adolescent girls' participation in organised physical activity,' says Dr Tony Okley, from the University of Wollongong, who is an expert on the link between fundamental movement skills and health.

Once again, parents who force or push their children into learning and practising skills may do more harm than good. Learning how to throw or kick a ball should happen naturally, as part of fun and play.

It is especially important for children who are overweight or unconfident of their physical prowess that this kind of learning happens in a relaxed and encouraging way. One study showing that overweight children were quite aware of their

## The big fat conspiracy

lower levels of movement skills concluded that they need opportunities to learn and master such skills in a supportive environment where parents, teachers and coaches gave them positive and specific feedback and modelling.<sup>39</sup> Making a child learn or practise such skills 'because it will help them lose weight' could just make things worse—by turning activity into an unpleasant chore.

## Walking to school

Once upon a time, children walked to school and nobody thought anything of it. These days it takes a great deal of energy, organisation and commitment to arrange it. That, at least, has been the experience of many of those involved in walking school buses, where adults acting as bus drivers and conductors collect children along agreed walking routes to and from school.

The concept has many pluses. It gives parents and children the chance to do some physical activity and to get to know their neighbours and neighbourhood, and it helps build a sense of community. Children learn about road safety and spend some out of school time with friends. Rather than being strapped into a vehicle and removed from the world, they get some adventure and interaction with the environment. They are less likely to observe and absorb their parents' irritability with the traffic or, in extreme cases, road rage. Teachers often say that children who arrive on the walking bus are in a better mood and more ready to concentrate in class than those who have come by car. Some schools notice a reduction in absenteeism and late arrivals.<sup>40</sup>

Walking school buses reduce traffic congestion around schools and can help parents, in the words of researcher Dr

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### Walking bus

Paul Tranter, escape the ‘social traps’ that push them into driving children to school to protect them from the traffic dangers created by parents who drive their children to school. They may contribute to safer, more child-friendly neighbourhoods. In the City of Port Phillip in Victoria, the walking school bus led to a pedestrian safety research project after bus volunteers reported that pedestrian lights did not give the walking bus enough time to cross the road.<sup>41</sup>

Those are some of the pluses. On the other hand, many communities have found it difficult to sustain walking school buses. They rely on the motivation and availability of volunteers, and not all schools, local governments or state governments have done enough to support them. Some attempts to establish walking school buses have been stymied by red tape and concerns about liability and safety issues. As well, some researchers criticise the concept, saying it encourages parental paranoia about their children’s’ safety.<sup>42</sup>

In 2002 and 2003, Associate Professor Jeff Walkley was part of a team which worked hard to establish walking school buses

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at several primary schools in the City of Whittlesea in Melbourne's northern suburbs. Only about 65 children, out of a possible 4200 children, joined the buses. The project had trouble getting volunteers to run the buses because most parents were working or couldn't spare the time. Many were also concerned about their children's safety. The layout of local streets may have been a deterrent, Walkley says, because parents couldn't keep children in their line of sight from when they left home until the 'bus stop'. However, those children who joined the buses became enthusiasts and reported many benefits.

A study of New Zealand's experience with walking school buses suggests they are most likely to succeed in well-to-do areas. They are least likely to survive in poorer areas, which also tend to have the most to gain from reducing traffic because of their higher rates of child pedestrian injuries. The researchers concluded that walking school buses have limited ability to solve the public health problems arising in car-dominated cities.<sup>43</sup> As ever, there is unlikely to be a single or simple solution for complex problems, like children's inactivity. 'Walking school buses are not for every community,' adds Associate Professor Melissa Wake at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne. 'But where you have the community behind them, it's terrific.'

A number of resources are available to help parents, schools and community organisations establish walking school buses (see Useful Resources). Many models have been developed, for a range of communities and needs.

If you think a walking bus is more than your community could do, you might want to consider setting up occasional or weekly walk-to-school days. Perhaps you could join the International Walk to School Week. In 2004, more than

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3 million children, parents and community leaders from 36 countries joined in this project. For more information, go to <http://www.iwalktoschool.org>.

Several years ago, a health promotion team from the Sydney South West Area Health Service began working with Forest Lodge Primary School in inner-western Sydney, and the local council, Leichhardt Council. At that time, 80 per cent of the school's students lived within 1 kilometre of the school, but 60 per cent were driven to school. Parents told researchers they were reluctant to let their children walk because of safety issues, including footpaths being blocked by cars. The council made changes that reduced such hazards, and within a year, more children were walking to school.

The project has been expanded, and it now incorporates a controlled trial involving 24 primary schools in Sydney's inner west. Half the schools are getting interventions designed to promote walking to school. These include classroom activities mapping where students live and where they can walk, newsletters to parents, and travel access guides showing families how to get to school without a car. A safety audit is also conducted around each school to identify and fix hazards that stop parents letting their children walk to school.

It is too early yet to know the project's impact on the rates of children walking to school, but it gives some hints about what might be useful for parents and schools in other areas. 'All the things we've done could be picked up for use elsewhere,' says Dr Chris Rissel, director of health promotion for the area health service. 'They're all sensible things that can help families and schools, especially the idea of helping parents with travel management. If parents knew how to use public transport themselves, they could teach the kids how to use it.'

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Some schools have found other transport solutions, including an early release from class for children who walk or cycle to school. This gives them 5 to 10 minutes to make a safe getaway and avoid the car crush.

Now that's an incentive for taking an active approach to school.

### One school's lesson

A few years ago, Graeme Brims became increasingly concerned by what he was reading, in almost every publication he picked up, about the sedentary lives of modern children. He decided to do something about it. As the principal of a primary school in a disadvantaged part of southwestern Sydney, he felt he had a special responsibility to take action.

At Carramar Public School at Villawood, there are students from more than 40 nationalities, and most come from families where there is no spare cash for extracurricular sport or other such activities.

After consulting with colleagues and parents, Graeme oversaw the introduction of a regular fitness program, in addition to the existing Friday sports afternoon. From 9am until 9.30am every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, all students from Kindergarten to Year 6 are involved in activities aimed at getting their bodies pumping. They might do aerobics, dance or a fun run.

Graeme's main motivation was to improve the children's learning rather than their physical fitness. 'There's a lot of research to show that healthy, fit kids learn better,' he says. 'They're much more attentive in class and their concentration spans are longer.'

The school also introduced classroom sessions on healthy eating.

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Graeme has noticed an improvement in students' performance—both in sporting competitions and the classroom—and is quick to recommend the program to other school communities. 'I would say it's made a difference,' he says. 'I'm really, really happy with it and so are the parents, teachers and kids. We try and make it fun. It's not like a chore. The kids understand the links between fitness and learning.'

## Critical times for encouraging activity

### Adolescence

Whether you're talking about dogs, children or horses, the same thing happens when young animals grow up. They become less playful, so they become less active and burn up less energy.

According to Associate Professor Tim Olds, this makes perfect sense when you consider that young animals play in order to develop skills and knowledge of their environment. When they are young, the benefits of play generally outweigh any associated risks, such as predators, injury or straying too far from a protective parent. 'As young animals learn more, they gain less from play but the risk remains the same,' Dr Olds says. 'They reach a tipping point around puberty, where it becomes more sensible, from an evolutionary point of view, to conserve energy.'

Keep that in mind next time you're tempted to label your teenager a sloth. They are just doing what comes naturally at their time of life—sleeping, eating and conserving their energy. Other factors may also be involved, of course—puberty

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often coincides with the transition to high school and increased demands on children's time, as well as broader attitudinal changes. Running around the school yard is just not cool after a certain age.

Whatever the reason, however, puberty often means the start of inactivity. One Victorian study, which used an instrument to assess activity levels in 5 to 6-year-olds and 10 to 12-year-olds, found a striking difference between the two groups. The younger children spent about 200 minutes a day in moderate activity, including walking, and about 30 minutes in vigorous activity. The older children spent only 100 minutes a day in moderate physical activity, and 20 minutes in vigorous activity.<sup>44</sup>

Other research has reported a 50 per cent decline in physical activity levels between the ages of 6 and 16.<sup>45</sup>

Many parents feel, wrongly, that they have little influence over teenagers, so they shrug their shoulders and give up instead of working out ways to help adolescents develop and maintain active habits. 'Parents harbour a view that what they say doesn't matter to adolescents,' says Trevor Shilton, a physical activity expert at the Heart Foundation. 'That flies in the face of research. What you say as a parent and your permissiveness on issues is absolutely central. The popular image is that peer pressure is a key driver of smoking in adolescence, for instance. It is important, but the most important influence on whether a child smokes is whether their parent smokes, not whether their friends smoke.'

Parents can make a difference by being active themselves and supporting their teenagers to follow suit. But they need to try to see the world from their teenager's viewpoint. Associate Professor Geraldine Naughton is only partly joking when she

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says that the ideal solution to adolescent inactivity would be a phone that works only when they are walking. Her serious point is that parents need to be creative and responsive to teenagers' interests. She cites the example of a high school which offers girls the opportunity to 'power shop' rather than doing sport. They probably use up more energy walking to the shops, talking and laughing, than they would standing unenthusiastically on a sports field. Asking teenage girls to exercise for hours at a stretch would probably just get groans. But many will happily dance for that long without even looking at their watch.

An Australian study which asked 213 children aged 7 to 17 to rank the benefits of physical activity, provides some useful hints for helping to motivate teenagers. At the top of their lists were the social benefits, including the opportunity to socialise with friends, teamwork and the impact of fitness on other areas of life, including coping and life skills and parents' approval. They also appreciated the sense of achievement, pride, self-esteem, confidence, discipline, enjoyment of challenges and excitement. And they liked how it made them feel physically, including improved strength, sleep and energy levels, and less fatigue. Lastly, they mentioned their improved sport performance and fitness and cognitive benefits, including stress relief, relaxation and having an outlet for aggression, frustration and anger.<sup>46</sup>

All the age groups in the study said they would like to do outdoor games and activities with their parents, and for their parents to encourage them to become involved in physical activities. The teenagers told the researchers that existing PE programs were often boring. They wanted to try new things, such as aerobics, martial arts, yoga, archery, hiking and rock

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climbing. The girls said they would like female-oriented sports and activities taught by female teachers in private facilities. They suggested having doors on the school showers and changing rooms, and wanted to be able to select the type of sports uniform they wore.

Teenage girls may be particularly vulnerable to inactivity because they are self-conscious about their bodies. Mothers can be particularly influential on the activity levels of teenage girls—research suggests they are important role models in this area. In one study, sporty teenage girls said they were inspired by their mothers being active, and being generally interested in and supportive of activity.<sup>47</sup> Other research suggests that high school girls are more likely than boys to give up activity during winter, which means we need to focus on what they might be interested in doing, physically, during the colder months.<sup>48</sup> Girls from Mediterranean, Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds may need more—and more carefully targeted—support to be active, as research shows they are more inactive than other teenage girls.<sup>49</sup>

Teenagers in country areas also need special attention. A South Australian study conducted in 1997 found that rural children aged 9 to 12 were significantly fitter than their city counterparts, perhaps because they were more likely to participate in club sport and school PE.<sup>50</sup> These findings contrast with another South Australian study showing that adults living in country areas tended to be heavier than those living in Adelaide. If you put these two sets of results together, it seems that adolescence is a critical time for those living in the country, and they may need extra help to make a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood.

### Get with the VERB™

In the United States, health authorities decided to learn from the marketing experts when putting together a campaign to encourage activity in the so-called tweens set (kids aged about 9 to 13). They knew that this was the time when children began to be more influenced by ideas about what was cool (or not), and were at risk of becoming set in sedentary ways.

The result was VERB, a national campaign, co-ordinated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that used advertising and social marketing strategies to persuade tweens that it is both fun and cool to be active. Just like product marketers, the campaign's organisers did market research when developing their 'brand'. This found that tweens would respond positively to messages encouraging them to explore and discover physical activities that are fun, occur in a socially inclusive environment, and that emphasise self-esteem and belonging to their peer group.

The campaign, based on the active properties of verbs, included resources and hints for parents, teachers and relevant organisations. Tweens also have their own website with cool active characters and games. Here are some of VERB's tips for teachers:

- Have students name a VERB or action they would like to try for the first time, and help them develop a plan to make it happen.
- Ask students to get into groups and invent a new game by combining aspects of different sports, dances, or games. Then have each group teach the class how to do the new activity.
- At the start of class have students take a quick stretch break or do a VERB or action. The break helps rejuvenate the students and is a great opportunity to learn about different muscles—and VERBs.
- Set a project researching how different cultural groups play games or sports, and

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- Have the class draw up a map of free or affordable activities in the area to share with the students' families.

Sadly, it seems unlikely that VERB will be extended beyond its first five years, and experts have bemoaned the likely demise of a 'well-designed and effective program'.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately this is a familiar story the world over. Just because a program is effective, doesn't mean it will last. But you can still get plenty of tips from the VERB websites: <http://www.VERBnow.com>, or <http://www.cdc.gov/youthcampaign/>

## After school

If you want a quick test for whether a child is being active enough, find out how they spend the time between finishing school and dinner. If they're slumped in front of the TV or computer, the odds are not in their favour.

Many experts say the after-school hours are a critical window of opportunity for influencing children's activity. 'What they do then is one of the distinguishing features between the active and inactive kids,' says Boyd Swinburn, Professor of Population Health at Deakin University in Victoria. The Australian Sports Commission says 3pm to 6pm is 'perhaps the single most important time' for increasing movement and stopping sedentary behaviour.

Of course this presents a dilemma for the many working parents who can't be at home to influence their children's behaviour during these hours. And for all the other parents who are flat out with chores such as looking after younger children or preparing dinner, and also can't help their kids make the most of this time.

But even some simple strategies might help:

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- If you are home after school, prompt the kids to be active: make sure the TV is kept switched off, or pull out the games box, or invite friends over to play, for example. One study, of Year 5 students in western Sydney, found that about 40 per cent did not receive any prompt to be active after school.<sup>52</sup>
- Set up a roster with other parents to give children the opportunity for supervised play, whether at a park or at each other's places.
- Consider enrolling your child in after school care
- Encourage after school care services to provide plenty of opportunities for active play if they are not already doing so.
- Some parents may be able to arrange greater flexibility in their working arrangements so that one parent can be home some days after school for at least some days of the week.

## Children's best friend

Some people say there are just three types of people in the world: dog people, cat people and the rest. Dog people know there are just two types: themselves and those sad others.

So I'd better declare my interest here. Every morning, two sets of beautiful brown eyes fix themselves firmly upon me and do not let up until they've got what they want: their morning walk. Who needs a personal trainer when dogs will do the job just fine?

Of course dogs are not for everyone, but there are plenty of public health experts ready to sing their praises. Several years ago, an authoritative publication known as *The Medical Journal of Australia* published a study suggesting that a campaign to encourage dog owners to walk their dogs more often could save millions of dollars in health care costs by reducing the need for heart disease treatment.

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**Dog trainer**

The most unusual aspect of the study—apart from the proliferation of puns such as ‘this report cuts to the bone and unleashes an incisive public health argument for increasing dog walking’—was the species of one of its authors. Shroeder J. Russell, a ‘canine walking advocate’, was listed as the second author on the paper, after his owner, public health expert Professor Adrian Bauman.<sup>53</sup> ‘It’s one of my most cited papers,’ says Bauman, who now has two Jack Russells. They ensure that he rarely misses his daily walk.

Bauman, like many other public health experts, believes dogs can play an important role in encouraging families and children to be more active. It is his top suggestion for parents wondering how to bring more activity into their family’s lives. ‘Walking is an adult thing that bores kids,’ he says, ‘but walking the dog is a family thing.’

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Dogs make walking a more interesting experience for young children and have also been shown to encourage teenage girls to walk more, he says. Victorian research shows that 10 to 12-year-old girls were more likely to be active if they had a dog, perhaps because it helped alleviate safety concerns about them walking the streets.<sup>54</sup>

‘People often ring the Heart Foundation and ask me what kind of exercise equipment I recommend,’ says Trevor Shilton. ‘Exercise equipment is probably the leading item in people’s garage sales. You get it and use it for a week and never use it again. I always say “Do you have a dog?” Second question, “Does it have a leash?”’

‘It’s funny how people will always take their dog for a walk because it’s good for the dog, and they don’t fully appreciate how good it is for them and their family.’

Walking the dog is not only good for physical health; it can also have social and psychological benefits. A Perth study found that pet owners were more likely to interact with neighbours, to be involved in their local community and to describe their neighbourhood as friendly. They were also more likely to rate their health as excellent or very good and less likely to feel lonely.<sup>55</sup>

Children learn about responsibility and nurturing when caring for animals. Pets also give them companionship, affection and a playmate.<sup>56</sup> One study of primary school children found many ranked their relationships with pets as more important than some of their relationships with humans.<sup>57</sup>

Even devotees admit that dogs are no miracle solution. They involve care and commitment. Some breeds are more demanding than others. Not all dogs and breeds make suitable family pets, and far too many children are injured by dogs each year.

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And there's nothing sadder than a pooch deprived of regular exercise. Adrian Bauman's study found that 59 per cent of dog owners did not walk their mutts. There's no point contemplating a dog for the family unless you're prepared to walk the walk.

Nor are dogs' many merits universally appreciated. Virginia Jackson, a town planner at the Melbourne firm of Harlock Jackson, believes local government and planning authorities need to do more to create dog-friendly neighbourhoods. Many new housing developments make it almost impossible for dogs (and therefore also their owners) to be active, she says. She cites one new, fast-growing development in outer Melbourne which does not have a single off-lead area for dogs. 'We can't even get it right when we are building new suburbs on the urban fringe,' says Jackson. 'Dog owners are not regarded as legitimate users of open spaces. Town planners just don't seem to think that planning for dogs is an issue anyone needs to think about.'

But Jackson is doing her bit to make cities and suburbs more dog-friendly. She is writing animal management strategies for councils, and has developed pet-friendly urban design guidelines (available at <http://www.petnet.com.au>) as well as some guidelines to promote the integration of dogs into public open space. She knows from her own personal experience just how helpful a dog can be to a family's health. 'With all the concerns about stranger danger, parents might actually be happier letting their kids play or walk outside if they have a dog with them,' she says. 'I am starting to let my 10-year-old walk half a kilometre to the milk bar, but I insist she takes my mobile phone and the dog with her.'

Did I mention the other reason dogs are so much better than your average walking machine? They don't just motivate you to walk every day; they also reward you with love and laughs.

## Learning from Australia's beef capital

The bull statues dotted around Rockhampton are symbolic, and not only because the central Queensland town likes to be known as the beef capital of Australia. Many locals are themselves, to put it bluntly, a bit beefy—carrying more weight than is good for their health. But in public health circles, Rockhampton has recently developed quite another sort of reputation. It is now rather famous as the setting for a large-scale experiment—using the entire town as a laboratory—which tested the power of the pedometer.

Vets, hairdressers, community groups, employers, GPs and other health professionals and local media outlets and identities were enlisted in the campaign to encourage locals to take 10,000 steps each day. This is equivalent to about 8 kilometres or 100 minutes of walking—and it's about 30 minutes more walking than most people do each day—and is considered the level of activity needed to reap health benefits.

Hundreds of pedometers, which are small devices attached to a belt to count the number of steps you take, were distributed to help motivate locals as well as to monitor their progress, while a media campaign helped raise awareness about the health benefits of physical activity. The project—funded by the Queensland Government and carried out by researchers at the University of Queensland and Central Queensland University—also involved environmental changes, such as improvements to footpaths, to make walking more appealing.

An evaluation of the 2 year project compared trends in activity levels between 2001 and 2003 in Rockhampton and Mackay, the city used as a control.<sup>58</sup> It identified some measurable benefits, especially for women:

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- In 2001, 48.3 per cent of residents in Mackay were physically active, compared with 41.9 per cent in Rockhampton. Two years later, 41.9 per cent of Mackay residents were active, compared with 42.8 per cent of Rockhampton people. The campaign appears to have stopped the fall in activity levels which happened elsewhere.
- Between 2001 and 2003, the proportion of women in Rockhampton who were active rose from 35.8 per cent to 40.8 per cent, while in Mackay the proportion of women who were active fell from 47.1 per cent to 43.1 per cent. The increase in women's activity in Rockhampton was not quite statistically significant so it may have been a chance finding or statistical aberration. However, the study's other findings suggest that it was a real increase.
- Between 2001 and 2003, the proportion of men who were active in Mackay fell from 49.6 per cent to 40.7 per cent. The decline was smaller in Rockhampton: from 49 per cent to 44.8 per cent.
- In 2003, 18 per cent of the Rockhampton residents who were surveyed said they had used a pedometer in the last 18 months, compared with 5.6 per cent of those in Mackay.

For all the effort involved, the changes may seem modest. But they sound more impressive when you consider all the forces encouraging people to be sedentary—and remember that the study was able to achieve increases, for women at least, at a time when activity levels across Australia were declining.

Wendy Brown, Professor of Physical Activity and Health at the University of Queensland and chief investigator on the Rocky project, also cites research showing that every 1 per cent increase in physical activity is estimated to prevent 122 deaths from heart

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disease, non insulin-dependent diabetes and colon cancer each year—and save about \$3.6 million in direct health care costs.

The Rockhampton experience suggests that pedometers can be useful for getting people walking. Even some of the athletic types involved in running the project were shocked when they put on a pedometer and discovered how few steps they did some days.

Many schools and families everywhere have found pedometers a fun tool for motivating and monitoring activity. Recommendations for how many steps children should do each day vary. One guide says that children aged 8 to 10 should aim for 12,000 to 16,000 steps and that adolescents and healthy young adults should walk between 7000 and 13,000 steps each day. Others believe that rather than making a blanket set of recommendations for all children, it is more helpful for each child to set an individual goal.

Pedometers have also been used successfully to boost activity among obese children and adults. In one study, young people in Brisbane were given a pedometer to evaluate their baseline levels of activity and were then helped to set a goal of increasing their steps over the following fortnight. Their parents were also given pedometers and encouraged to do the same. During the 10 weeks of the program, the children increased their daily step count by an average of 36 per cent. The researchers concluded that a home-based activity program incorporating positive reinforcement, parental support, problem solving and self-monitoring via a pedometer could increase physical activity among obese youth.

Pedometers are now widely available and are relatively inexpensive. Another option when you're looking for an active gift, perhaps? If they help keep children moving in the years after those celebrated first steps, they might be worth a try.

# **11. How to tell if your child is overweight... and what to do about it**

## **How does your child measure up?**

Parents often find it hard to acknowledge that their child is overweight. This has been found in many studies. In one case, Australian researchers found that about half the parents of obese children thought their children were of a normal weight or even underweight.<sup>1</sup> Parents may be in denial, perhaps conscious of their own weight or lifestyle issues. They might think their son or daughter must be OK because they are about the same size as their friends. They may be concerned, quite rightly, that making children weight-conscious is not a good idea. Or they might think a bit of puppy fat is just a passing phase and nothing to worry about. That might have been the case in generations past, when chubby children probably had a much greater chance of

## **How to tell if you child is overweight...**

growing out of their plumpness. But these days, the big fat conspiracy ensures that many overweight children will grow into overweight adults, with all the risks that brings for their health and wellbeing.

It can be difficult to tell whether or not someone is at a healthy weight. Adults are not good at judging themselves either, and sometimes think they are closer to a healthy weight than they really are. Overweight men are particularly likely to do this. Indeed, one Australian study found that 43 per cent of overweight or obese male university students were satisfied with their body size; some even wanted to be bigger. The same study also found that most underweight women were either satisfied with their body size or wanted to be even slimmer.<sup>2</sup>

It is even more difficult to judge weight in children, whose bodies grow and change rapidly. It is not always easy to distinguish between weight gain that accompanies normal growth and weight gain that should be cause for concern. Dr Michele Campbell, a paediatrician and researcher at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute at the Royal Children's Hospital in Victoria, says even paediatricians, nurses and obesity researchers like herself can get it wrong when they simply 'eyeball' a child to judge their weight. Parents also interpret their children's weight differently according to gender; Dr Campbell's research shows parents are more likely to be concerned if a daughter is overweight. It is sometimes seen as an advantage for a boy to be big.

This chapter gives some pointers on how to tell the difference between weight gain that is healthy and weight gain that may be a health risk. It also offers some suggestions about what to do if the warning bells are ringing.

## **Understanding normal growth and development**

We come in different shapes and sizes. Thank goodness. What a boring world it would be if we didn't. Our aim should not be to strive for some ideal body but to respect and celebrate individual differences. A whole range of shapes and sizes fall within the range of healthy growth and development. Some children will be tall and wiry; others will not. And girls and boys, it need hardly be said, follow different paths along the growth track.

### **Infants**

Fat cells can be found in the developing foetus from about the 14th week of gestation. In a newborn, fat accounts for about 13 per cent of the baby's body mass. It is perfectly normal for babies to look chubby. By the end of their first year, babies are typically about 28 per cent fat.<sup>3</sup> About the time of weaning they begin a trend towards leanness.

### **Early childhood**

In the 3–5 years following a baby's first birthday, the proportion of body fat declines.<sup>4</sup> Dr Michele Campbell says many parents become anxious at this stage, worried that their child might not be eating enough. 'It's important for parents to know that slimming down in preschool is normal,' she says.

Between the ages of about 4 and 6, children reach what is known as 'adiposity rebound', a point where growth patterns switch. 'Adipose' is a medical term for fat. At adiposity rebound, children typically move from getting thinner into a stage of getting fatter again. This stage usually lasts until around puberty. If a child's body mass index (BMI: see below

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for more on this) is regularly charted, it will typically show a dip around the time of starting school. The point where the BMI bottoms out and then starts to steadily increase again is the point of adiposity rebound.

A number of studies have shown that children who reach adiposity rebound early (younger than other children) are more likely to become obese in later childhood and adolescence—regardless of whether they were lean or fat before that point. It is not clear why this might be so and it may not be a simple matter of cause and effect. It might reflect another one of those circular chains: that children who are genetically predisposed to obesity mature earlier as a result of being heavier and then go on to be fatter in adolescence. Alternatively, some experts believe the association might indicate that the effects of behaviours learnt earlier in childhood—around eating and activity, for example—are becoming apparent at about the time of adiposity rebound. Some research also suggests that an early adipose rebound may be more likely in children exposed to the effects of their mother's gestational diabetes while still in the womb.<sup>5</sup>

The difference between the genders begins well before puberty. Girls as young as 4 tend to have a higher proportion of body fat than boys, even when you are comparing boys and girls of similar age, height weight and BMI.<sup>6</sup>

## **Puberty and adolescence**

After growing steadily through their primary school years, children usually hit a growth spurt about the time of puberty. This is associated with significant changes in body composition. The adolescent growth spurt typically begins around age 10 or 11 for girls and 12 to 13 in boys. During this

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stage, boys gain an average of 20 centimetres in height and 20 kilograms in weight, and girls typically gain around 16 centimetres in height and 16 kilograms.<sup>7</sup>

Girls are reaching menarche (their first period) at younger and younger ages. This is probably due to improvements in living standards, and it is thought to be an important factor contributing to overweight—the younger girls are at menarche, the greater their risk of being overweight later on. By the time of menarche, girls are already about 95 per cent of their height.

The difference between girls' and boys' bodies really becomes obvious during adolescence. Girls are programmed for curves; boys are more linear. In girls, body fat typically accounts for about 17 per cent of body mass at the start of adolescence and about 24 per cent by its end. Boys tend to put on weight later in puberty and it mainly reflects an increase in their lean body mass.<sup>8</sup> While boys' body fat typically declines during adolescence, it tends to become more concentrated around their middle.<sup>9</sup>

Adolescence is one of the periods when people are most likely to gain excess weight that they then can't lose.<sup>10</sup> One review estimated that almost a third of obese adults became obese during adolescence.<sup>11</sup>

## The body mass index (BMI)

It's not surprising that parents have such difficulty knowing when children are overweight or obese—the experts have trouble drawing that line themselves. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the BMI is generally accepted as the best tool for assessing overweight and obesity. It is calculated by dividing weight (kg) by height squared ( $m^2$ ). BMI charts for children use cut-off scores that take stages of growth and development into account.

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But it's always sensible to be cautious about what a test result actually means, and this is especially the case with using BMI charts for children.

In adults, studies have helped establish when a BMI is likely to signal an increased risk of health problems. An adult with a BMI of 25 to 30 is overweight, and a BMI of above 30 signals obesity. The same degree of precision cannot be used for children because there are no large, long-term studies that establish what level of BMI in what age child signals an increased risk of health problems in later life. As you might imagine, these studies would be expensive and take decades. So the BMI cut-offs used to signal overweight and obesity in children are rather arbitrary. They are based on experts' best guesses about what is appropriate rather than on hard evidence.

As well, the BMI reflects a person's weight rather than their degree of fatness; two children with the same BMI may have quite different levels of fatness. One may be tubby around the tummy (which is of particular concern) and the other may be solidly muscular. Using the BMI charts may result in some overweight children being wrongly classified as of normal weight, but very few children would be classified as overweight if they were not.<sup>12</sup> BMI charts may be less reliable in children or adolescents who are particularly short or tall for their age or whose body fat is distributed unusually.

And then there's the fact that the BMI charts recommended for use in Australia are not based on studies of Australian children. They were developed by the Centers for Disease Control in the United States. If there are any significant differences between the growth trends of Australian and North American children, they will not be reflected in the charts.

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This may be an issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, whose growth patterns have not been clearly defined by research. The BMI charts may also be less relevant for children with Asian, Pacific Islander and other non-Caucasian backgrounds.

Having said all that, the BMI charts are the best available tool for monitoring children's growth and weight gain (an on-line calculator for determining children's BMI has been developed by NSW Health at: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/youth/bmi.html>). Children's waist size is another good indicator, especially because fat around the middle seems to carry more of a health risk than fat elsewhere. Again, however, there are not reliable figures to indicate which waist size should trigger alarm bells.

The National Health and Medical Research Council has recommended that children's height and weight should be measured at least twice a year as part of routine care by their family doctor<sup>13</sup>. This is important for plotting trends and for detecting any sudden upswings in BMI.

In practice, however, you can't assume that this will automatically happen. Researchers have found that few GPs routinely weigh and measure the children they see in their practice or calculate their BMI.<sup>14</sup> Many do not even have the equipment to precisely chart changes in a child's BMI over time. The researchers concluded that this National Health and Medical Research Council recommendation seems to be a 'pipe dream' at the moment. And not all experts are convinced it is a good idea anyway, given uncertainty about the impact of this sort of clinical focus on overweight children. 'There is no evidence yet to support the idea that intervening with these kids clinically does more good than harm,' says Dr Melissa

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Wake, of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne.

If parents are concerned about their children's weight, they may need to raise the issue themselves with their family doctor. It is best to do this in a way that does not make your child self-conscious about their weight—perhaps discuss it with the doctor before bringing your child to the surgery.

Of course a BMI is easy enough to calculate yourself, but whether parents should monitor their children's BMI is a vexed question. Certainly they should understand the BMI and have an idea where their child fits on the charts. But some experts worry that encouraging parents to monitor children's BMI at home might foster an unhealthy focus on weight which could, in the long term, be counterproductive. Children who worry about their weight and diet or restrict their food intake are more likely to end up with weight problems. 'I don't want parents measuring and plotting the child on the charts,' says Sydney specialist Professor Louise Baur. 'That is a recipe for encouraging labelling of children as overweight.'

## **Warning signs and children at increased risk**

The best way to understand a child's BMI is generally to look at several measurements over time rather than one measurement. This lets you monitor how the child's growth and development is going, in comparison with what might be expected.

How you interpret a child's BMI depends on many things. A BMI suggesting obesity is, of course, of greater concern than a BMI suggesting overweight. And a child who is overweight but whose BMI is consistent over time is less cause for concern than an overweight child whose BMI shows a marked increase.

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Excess weight in a preschooler is generally less worrying than excess weight in a teenager. Then again, a young child who is overweight and whose parents are obese and have family histories of diabetes may arouse more concerns than an overweight teenager who is fit and whose parents are both active and healthy.

So many factors have to be weighed up. Here are some:

### **Family history**

Children are more likely to carry too much weight if their parents or siblings do. Obesity is more likely to present health problems for children if there is a family history of type 2 diabetes or heart disease.

### **Some ethnic groups**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and those from Middle Eastern and Mediterranean backgrounds, are more likely to develop excess weight.

### **Preschool years**

Children typically lose fat in the years before the adiposity rebound (which is usually sometime between 4 and 6). Children who become fatter in the years before adiposity rebound are probably at increased risk of significant and persistent obesity.<sup>15</sup>

### **Early developers**

Children who reach adiposity rebound early, or who reach puberty early, are at greater risk of significant weight gain. Because overweight children are often tall for their age, it can be difficult to determine their degree of fatness by just looking

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at them.<sup>16</sup> Studies of children who became overweight have found that they tended to grow upwards at about the same time as they grew outwards.<sup>17</sup>

### **Adolescence**

Adolescents who carry too much weight are at risk of becoming overweight or obese adults.<sup>18</sup>

### **When overweight is a sign of an underlying medical problem**

These days, most children who gain excess weight are simply responding naturally to the obesogenic environment. For a small proportion, however, it can be a sign of an underlying medical issue:

- A number of medications have weight gain as a side effect. These include glucocorticosteroids, which are used to treat kidney disorders, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, chronic severe asthma and other inflammatory diseases. Some drugs used to treat psychiatric disorders and epilepsy can also cause weight gain, as can treatment for acute lymphatic leukaemia.<sup>19</sup>
- Adolescents with type 1 diabetes often gain weight, especially if their diabetes is not well controlled and they have unstable blood glucose and use high doses of insulin.
- Children with physical disabilities or mild learning difficulties may be more susceptible to weight gain.
- A number of endocrine disorders are associated with childhood obesity. They include hypothyroidism associated with thyroid enlargement, Cushing's disease and Cushing's syndrome, growth hormone deficiency, growth hormone resistance and some forms of rickets.<sup>20</sup>

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- The National Health and Medical Research Council says obesity features in a number of rare congenital syndromes. It recommends that children who are obese, intellectually disabled and who have multiple physical abnormalities should be assessed by a paediatrician, an endocrinologist and/or a geneticist. Children with the Prader-Wili syndrome, which is caused by a chromosomal abnormality, have an insatiable appetite which is extremely difficult for clinicians and families to manage.<sup>21</sup>

## **...and what to do about it**

### **When and where to get help**

This is truly a tricky issue, for several reasons. With any intervention—no matter how well meaning—there is always the potential to do harm as well as good. When to seek professional help depends to a large extent on a child's age and situation. If other family members are obese or suffer problems such as diabetes, that's a good indication that it might be worth seeking professional help sooner rather than later.

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that children and adolescents with a BMI showing they are overweight or obese should be considered for intervention, especially if they are suffering from problems related to their weight. If their BMI is borderline, they should be reviewed over a 6 month period before any decision is made about intervening.

But intervention must be carefully managed; it can make a child self-conscious, which can be counterproductive at a number of levels. It would be particularly worrying if it made

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them feel rotten about themselves or led to rigid dietary controls—these could send the child into the vicious circle of disordered eating habits, and could also harm their growth and development.<sup>22</sup>

And it must also be remembered that not all overweight children become overweight adults. Seeking professional help for every overweight child would result in an unnecessary focus on some children who will simply grow into a healthy weight as they get older. On the other hand, there is some evidence that weight management is more successful in children than in adults, so it makes sense to tackle the problem early in the children who are most likely to benefit. Some experts also argue that early intervention is most likely to be effective because the family has greater influence over the child's behaviour in the years before adolescence.<sup>23</sup> 'The beauty of working with children is that you can usually change their trajectory to overweight a lot more easily than [you can] with adults,' says Dr Zoe McCallum, a paediatrician at the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne. 'We're all set in our ways as we get older, but certainly if you work with a family with children at a preschool age, you can really change some behaviour patterns.'

Again it comes back to assessing an individual child's risk. The authors of one US study cautioned against intervening with obese children under the age of 3 if their parents were not obese, because these children were not at high risk of being obese later on. By contrast, the study found that 1 and 2-year-olds who were obese were also more likely to be obese as young adults if they had at least one obese parent.<sup>24</sup>

Many studies have shown that health professionals, like other people, often have negative attitudes towards people who are

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overweight or obese.<sup>25</sup> Dr Zoe McCallum says it is probably no coincidence that obese adults with the lowest self-esteem have often had the most interaction with the health system. 'Health professionals often don't do this very well, particularly if they come from what I call "the skinny person bias";' she says. 'In other words, they lack comprehension and empathy about how difficult it is to remain at a healthy weight in this environment.'

When you seek professional help, you and your family are entitled to feel comfortable and supported. The process may involve some challenging moments—including some re-examination of family attitudes and behaviours—but you have a right to be treated with respect and compassion. If you do not feel this is happening, find another health professional or service. Just don't let one bad experience stop you trying to make changes or find help.

With young children, it is generally agreed that the best approach is to work through the parents. Apart from regularly assessing the child, the most benefit comes from engaging parents in therapy aimed at changing the family's lifestyle and environment. Engaging young children in treatment may simply make them anxious. The situation is a little different for adolescents. The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that both they and their parents be involved in treatment. Parents and adolescents should attend consultations together and separately. Dr Zoe McCallum says taking a 'solution-focused approach' can work well. This involves the therapist talking through (with the parents or the adolescent) what changes they think might work, as well as what hasn't worked in the past. This is a meaningful conversation, and is more productive than the health professional simply giving instructions about what the client should do, she says.

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It's important to be realistic about what treatment can achieve, too. Many children who are moderately overweight will be able to grow into their weight with only minor modifications to the family lifestyle. Keeping these children at the same weight while they grow taller will lead to reductions in their BMI. But for more serious weight problems, quick solutions are unlikely. If that is what is promised, you are unlikely to be disappointed. Managing obesity usually requires a long-term commitment and has been shown to bring 'modest success' for children and adolescents in the medium to long term.<sup>26</sup> For some children and adolescents, the goal of treatment will be to relieve any associated symptoms and to ensure the best quality of life possible. Many obese children and adolescents never reach an optimum BMI; they can be helped, however, to have a healthy and active lifestyle and to feel good about themselves. The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines note that fat loss is not the only goal of treatment—it is also important to monitor children's emotional and psychological wellbeing.

The main tools of treatment are those described in Chapters 5 to 9. These include changing the family's behaviours and environment so it is easy for all family members to be active each day (including decreasing sedentary activities such as TV watching) and enjoying a healthy diet. Many medical reviews have noted the lack of evidence about which of these approaches is the most effective for managing overweight in children and adolescents.<sup>27</sup> It also depends on the individual family's situation: some may find it easier to alter their diet; others may find it easier to build more physical activity into their life. Professor Louise Baur says it is important that the approach is appropriate for the age of the child. 'We would

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deal with a 4-year-old very differently from a teenager,' she says.

Finding ways to increase activity levels in seriously overweight children can be a challenge, particularly because of the discomfort—chafing, sweating, heat rashes and breathlessness—that they often experience with exercise. It is particularly important with these children to find activities that they enjoy and can sustain. They may need extra help as they build the skills and confidence to participate. Be patient; this may take time. The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines say overweight children and adolescents are more likely to continue with lifestyle exercises (such as games, swimming, dance and cycling) than with programmed aerobic exercise. Competitive sport may be inappropriate and may only exacerbate any psychological or social problems. Children should be given positive reinforcement for participating in physical activities. But try not to measure their success according to whether they have lost weight. Instead, praise their improved skills or acknowledge their changes in behaviour.

In extreme cases, where a child's health is seriously compromised by their weight, more extreme approaches to treatment may be needed, including very low energy diets. The National Health and Medical Research Council says this should only be attempted in a tertiary institution and under the care of a specialist multidisciplinary team. For adolescents in this situation, the Council says drug therapy or surgery may be worth considering. However, such treatments should be used only as a last resort and with great caution.

Another reason why the treatment issue is so tricky is the desperate shortage of services available to help the families of

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overweight children. In an ideal world, families would have an expert medical assessment followed by numerous consultations with a dietitian, psychologist and exercise physiologist, as needed, to provide ongoing advice and support, says Professor Louise Baur. In the real world, most families do not have access to this range of services. And even if they were available where and when families needed them, the cost would probably be prohibitive.

This lack of appropriate treatment services is yet another reason why prevention is by far the best approach. For many families, though, the horse has already bolted; they need help to try to stop it becoming even more of a problem.

Finding the most appropriate source of help for your family may take some research and effort. If at first you don't succeed, don't give up. Don't be tempted to try clinics offering quick fixes (more of that in the section on 'dieting dangers'). Here are some ideas for where to find help:

### **General practitioners (GPs)**

GPs are often described as the cornerstone of the health system, because they are in a unique position to assess patients' needs, to provide ongoing primary care and to refer them to other services where necessary. Many obesity experts believe GPs are ideally placed to act as the frontline troops in managing and preventing childhood weight problems. They also have an important role in managing medical problems associated with obesity, such as checking for early warning signs of diabetes. The National Health and Medical Research Council has published guidelines to support GPs in managing obesity in children and adolescents. These are freely available on the internet and provide useful advice for families as well.

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Many GPs, however, have not been trained in how to manage weight problems generally, let alone in children. Many do not feel confident about their skills in this area and are unsure of whether or how to raise the issue with patients. Some, no doubt, don't particularly want to get involved. They can find it confronting, time consuming and frustrating. Many GPs already feel overburdened with all the other problems they are expected to manage, and have little time or energy to be proactive about children's weight.

Dr Louise Roufeil, program director with the NSW Central West Division of General Practice, has conducted research asking people in her region about what they would do if their child was obese. Many do not even think of seeing their GP; they see weight as a problem which they have to solve themselves. 'My concern is that people don't see a role for health professionals, and that dovetails with what we know about health professionals not feeling comfortable to intervene,' Dr Roufeil says.

But many people will find it difficult to make the necessary changes without professional support. Try to find a GP who is willing and able to engage with you and your family. If weight is a family problem, you may also need help from allied health professionals such as a dietitian, psychologist or exercise physiologist. Ideally, your GP should be linked into these networks so they can all work together to support your family in making change.

If you have trouble finding a suitable GP, ask around. Specialist childhood obesity clinics at children's hospitals or your local Division of General Practice may be able to give you some recommendations. So might dietitians or other allied health professionals.

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### Step by step<sup>28</sup>

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that GPs take a step-by-step approach to assessing and managing weight problems in children. The steps include:

1. Assess extent of overweight or obesity in the child or adolescent relative to their stage of development. Measure their height, weight and waist circumference and pubertal stage.
2. Assess health complications associated with weight and treat these independently where appropriate.
3. Assess why and how energy imbalance has occurred.
4. Determine the level of clinical intervention required.
5. Devise treatment strategy with the patient and family.
6. Devise treatment goals, including ones unrelated to weight.
7. Review and provide regular assistance for weight management and maintenance of weight change.
8. Change program as required.

## Dietitians

Dietitians can identify problems in the family's shopping and eating habits, and help you work out some strategies to fix them. However, it can be difficult to access dietitians. Those in public health services are often overloaded and have long waiting lists. Some families may not be able to afford those in the private sector. And private dietitians are scarce in some areas. In New South Wales, for instance, two-thirds of the dietitians who specialise in weight management are in northern, central or southeastern Sydney<sup>29</sup>. People living in outer suburban, rural, remote or regional areas may have to travel to find help.

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For help in finding a dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia or ask your local GP or Division of General Practice for a recommendation.

### **Psychologists and other behavioural therapists**

Changing entrenched patterns of behaviour and dealing with complex issues of family dynamics can be extremely challenging. Working with a professional can be confronting, but it can also help make the change process easier and more effective. There are many techniques, including cognitive behavioural therapy and solution-focused coaching. Again, cost is sometimes an issue, because most people will not be able to access these sorts of services through the public system.

Contact the Australian Psychological Society if you need help finding an appropriate therapist. Or ask your GP or local Division of General Practice for a recommendation.

### **Specialist weight management clinics for children and adolescents**

These services are usually based in children's hospitals or other teaching hospitals. They are in short supply and great demand, and it is not uncommon for families to wait more than a year to be seen.

These clinics have the great advantage of involving a multidisciplinary team. But if you do not live close to such a service and are put off by the long wait, ask your GP if there are any other options available. Your GP or the Paediatrics Division of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians may know of other specialists who could help.

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that children with severe and early onset obesity

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should be referred for specialist assessment. Children whose obesity is suspected to be the result of a medical problem should also see a specialist.

### **Community health centres**

Community health centres provide another option for treatment, but not every area has one. Your state or territory Department of Health or local Division of General Practice should know what services are available in your area.

### **Universities and researchers**

Another way to get help might be through a study or trial testing various treatment approaches. Check with local universities and hospitals; you may be able to leave your details for future reference if nothing is immediately available.

By now something important has no doubt become obvious: despite all the political and professional rhetoric about the perils of childhood obesity, there is remarkably little support available to help families grappling with these issues. Perhaps Dr Louise Roufeil's finding—that parents believe they have to find the solutions themselves—is not so surprising after all. One way parents could help themselves (and others) is by becoming advocates and lobbying politicians and bureaucrats for better services. More on that in Chapter 13.

## **Mind your focus**

### **Focus on the family, not the child**

Weight management is far more likely to be effective if the whole family is involved. The family environment has a powerful influence on a child's weight.

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Singling out the overweight or obese child is a recipe for trouble. First, children have little control over their environment. It is unfair and unproductive to expect an individual child to change their ways when the rest of the family is not. 'How can you expect a child to enjoy their vegies if Mum and Dad don't enjoy theirs?' says Dr Janet Warren, Senior Research Dietitian at the University of Newcastle in New South Wales. 'How can you expect a child to be physically active when they get home if the rest of the family sits around watching TV?' Professor Louise Baur says every family member who buys and prepares food, including grandparents or other carers, needs to be involved in the change process.

Making the individual child the focus of attention also risks making them self-conscious and resentful. It can encourage victim-blaming attitudes in the family.

Adolescents can take more responsibility for their environment and behaviour. But they too may be more likely to respond positively to change if everyone in the family is doing it. They may also be more likely to participate if they've had a hand in working out some of the solutions and feel that their concerns are being taken seriously and dealt with. Most people don't like being told what to do; teenagers, like the rest of us, are more likely to do something if they feel some ownership of what's being done.

### **Focus on healthy eating and activity, not on weight**

The overriding goal is for children to be healthy and happy. This is most likely to happen if their family and broader environment make them feel valued and supported and make it easy for them to eat well and be physically active.

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Making children and adolescents self-conscious about their weight is a recipe for trouble. It may send their self-esteem plummeting and encourage unhealthy eating patterns which set them up for a lifelong battle with food and weight.

Doctors who specialise in treating obese children often hear parents use negative language, which only compounds their children's problems. Telling children they are 'bad eaters' or 'lazy' won't do anything except make them feel miserable.

When you are making changes to family routines, try not to raise the weight issue. Instead, talk about healthy eating and activity making everyone feel better.

If you focus on healthy eating and activity, everyone benefits. Many family members who do not have a weight problem could also benefit from eating better and moving more.

## **Dangerous dieting**

Now, where shall we start? There are so many reasons to steer clear of dieting. And that's if you're a grown-up. For children and teenagers, dieting is even worse:

- Restricting children's energy intake when their bodies are still growing can adversely affect their growth and development.
- Dieting encourages an unhealthy focus on food and promotes disordered eating patterns. It helps people lose touch with their internal cues for hunger and fullness.
- Dieting often starts a vicious cycle of food restriction and bingeing, which leads to weight gain. Binge eating is implicated in many cases of obesity.<sup>30</sup> It typically begins in late adolescence and is associated with body image dissatisfaction and regular dieting.

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- Diets are impossible to sustain—particularly today in Australia, where food is abundant, readily available and relatively affordable.
- Dieting makes eating a painful rather than a pleasurable experience. It makes people feel deprived and miserable. Rather than feeling rotten about eating less, it's far better to focus on eating differently—and enjoying it.
- Parents who diet are encouraging unhealthy eating patterns in their children.
- Dieting reinforces unhealthy concerns about body image.
- Dieting is bad for self-esteem and mental health. When it doesn't work, as always happens, dieters often blame themselves for 'failing' when it is actually the diet that failed them.
- Dieting often restricts the range of foods people eat, making it more difficult to get the full range of nutrients needed for good health.
- And last, but not least, dieting doesn't work. If anything, it is likely to lead to weight gain. If your body feels it is being starved, it will use every physiological trick at its disposal to make the most of the food you do eat. The best way to lose weight and to keep it off is to make permanent changes to your lifestyle. Move more, eat better.

It's no wonder that weight loss guru Garry Egger describes television current affairs shows as 'the most fattening thing in Australia'. 'They are always selling stupid diets,' he says.

Ellyn Satter says diets or restrictive feeding practices for children are, quite simply, a disaster:

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I can think of no better way to get a family to fight, or to make a child a scapegoat, than by imposing a weight-reduction diet on a child. We have to reconcile ourselves to children not necessarily being at the weight we might like...We have to stop making kids feel like they will lose all their excess weight if they will only try hard enough. Being so unrealistic with them about their chances of being thinner is not motivating—it is just setting them up again and again for failure. The popular perception that anyone can get thinner if they only want it badly enough and are willing to work on it hard enough is simply not true.<sup>31</sup>

*Caveat:* Very low energy diets may be helpful for some children and adults with serious obesity. But the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines stress that these should be administered only under specialist care and supervision. This is a medical treatment—far removed from the ‘quick-fix’ diets often promoted in the media.

## The no-diets doctor

When Rick Kausman graduated from medical school in the late 1980s, he landed a job in a general practice in Melbourne that specialised in weight management. Patients were put on strict diets, told to take appetite suppressants and given long lists of forbidden foods.

It’s an approach which is a million miles from how Dr Kausman now works. Over the last 20-odd years, he has listened closely to his patients’ stories and learnt from them about what helps and what doesn’t.

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An advocate of the non-dieting approach to healthy weight management, Dr Kausman says that helping people reach a healthy weight is like trying to put a challenging jigsaw together. 'No two puzzles are exactly the same, but there are common themes,' he says.

Many people make the mistake of trying to complete the puzzle using just two pieces: nutrition and exercise. However, they are only part of a much more complex picture, Dr Kausman says. Other important pieces are people's attitudes to food, themselves and their bodies.

'Eating more slowly is a very important piece of the puzzle,' says Dr Kausman. 'You have to help people understand why they were eating quickly in the first place. One of the reasons is often because they feel guilty—if they feel a food is bad or wrong. There's much more to being a healthy weight than exercising more and eating less. We're at the same place where depression was 15 years ago—where there was this simplistic idea that people should just try harder and think happy thoughts.'

Dr Kausman emphasises the need for families to try changes that are realistic, empowering and sustainable. He jokes: 'I can guarantee to you that I can make you fitter—but it means you are never allowed to go in a car or public transport ever again. You must walk everywhere!

'In theory you might be able to get fitter in this way, but it wouldn't be compatible with normal living. We have to give people ideas and strategies that are possible to manage and achieve in the long term.'

## Surgery?

Many people are disturbed by the idea of subjecting young people to surgery as a treatment for obesity. It seems such a drastic measure. Professor Paul O'Brien, Director of the Centre for Obesity Research and Education at Monash University, Victoria, understands such concerns—and in fact shares them.

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But he believes that surgery is a valuable option for the small proportion of adolescents who are so severely obese that their health is in serious jeopardy.

For young people with severe obesity, O'Brien says lifestyle modification and drug therapy are rarely effective in the long term. He cites research suggesting that severe obesity at the age of 20 is associated with a 12-year reduction in life expectancy.

'People who get upset when we talk about surgery often don't recognise that severe obesity is such a serious health problem,' says O'Brien.

O'Brien specialises in a gastric banding procedure that involves placing an adjustable silicone band around the top part of the stomach, causing a feeling of fullness. Generally this is done using a minimally invasive surgical technique known as laparoscopy; there is no need for large surgical incisions. The procedure is reversible.

O'Brien has performed the procedure on about 1800 patients, including about 30 people under the age of 20. He is now involved in a randomised controlled trial, together with the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, which aims to evaluate the procedure in adolescents aged 14 to 18.

One half of the group are being randomly allocated to have surgery plus a lifestyle modification program; those in the control group are having only the lifestyle modification program. The study will examine the impact of surgery on the teenagers' weight and quality of life, as well as the costs involved.

O'Brien expects the results will help define the role of surgery in treating obesity in young people. Australia's growing weight problem is already escalating demand for gastric banding surgery, but O'Brien expects adolescents will only ever account for 1–2 per cent of the total caseload.

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The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines say surgery for obesity should be the 'last possible' option for severely obese adolescents with health problems, and undertaken only in an experienced centre after extensive consultation, assessment and education. After the operation, continuing care should be provided by an experienced weight management service.

### **Handling children's concerns**

Children are bombarded by conflicting media messages about their bodies. On the one hand, huge headlines sound the alarm about childhood obesity. On the other hand, so much media imagery promotes the virtue of unrealistically thin figures. It would be surprising if children weren't weight conscious, especially as so many of their parents are also caught in this trap.

All children, overweight or not, can benefit from understanding the role of the media and marketing in promoting unrealistic body images. This may be a fruitful topic for family discussions, which can become more complex as children grow older.

For children who are overweight, the best way to handle their concerns will depend on their age and individual situation. The issue probably does not need to be raised with young children. Studies show that preschoolers are not usually conscious of weight as an issue. Being overweight doesn't seem to affect their self-esteem.

But as children get older, parents need to work out ways to handle weight and related self-esteem issues. Older children and teenagers, particularly girls, are more likely to suffer self-esteem problems related to overweight.

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Doctors and others who specialise in treating obese children hear lots of horror stories of bullying. This is likely to be an extreme end of the spectrum: children who end up in treatment may be more likely than the many children who do not end up in treatment to have suffered such problems. Jane Cleary, a clinical dietitian at Wollongong Hospital in New South Wales, says families often seek help for social reasons—because their children are being bullied—rather than for health reasons.

Parents may not always know if their children are being picked on. Weight management experts often hear of children who haven't told their parents about the harassment they suffer. Professor Louise Baur advises parents to talk to their kids about bullying, to explain that some people bully others to make themselves feel better. Help them work on problem-solving skills to deal with bullying. Professor Baur also cautions parents to be aware that it is not only children who may make disparaging comments; it can also be adults. She says this is a reflection of the deeply moralistic views about overweight that are entrenched in our society.

If children have a serious weight problem, parents can help by disentangling the disorder from the child, Professor Baur says. Children who have been labelled as fat may have trouble seeing themselves as anything else. Parents can help them see all their positive characteristics by praising these things. They might be good at art, or good friends. Parents can help create new, more positive labels for their children, Professor Baur says. Parents may be able to help older children develop some problem-solving skills in this area too. Reading this book, for instance, might help them understand the power of the big fat conspiracy and so make it easier for them to deal positively

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with their situation, rather than sinking into self-blame and destructive behaviour.

Getting adolescents involved in the change process may also help them feel better about themselves. If they are involved in first identifying changes the family could make and then in helping to make these changes happen, they may gain a greater sense of control. And they may also be more motivated to make the changes themselves.

Dr Zoe McCallum says adults are often reluctant to raise the subject of weight with overweight children, though older children will almost certainly be aware of it. 'I've never had a consultation with a teenager who didn't acknowledge they were concerned about the issue themselves and were happy to have it followed up,' she says.

How you handle your children's concerns about their weight will also depend on your relationship. If you are in the habit of discussing big issues openly and frankly, you'll probably be OK. If your relationship is difficult at the best of times, it could be worth trying to enlist the help of some other influential adults, such as grandparents or neighbours.

Be careful with the language you use: it could make all the difference to how children respond to you. Careless or critical language may only make them more worried. One medical text recommends talking about weight rather than 'fatness' or 'obesity'—these words may be upsetting or offensive.<sup>32</sup> You may also need to examine your own attitudes. Some parents, perhaps without even realising it, express society's negative attitudes towards overweight. Jane Cleary says parents need to make sure that bullying and teasing do not happen in the home. 'The home needs to provide a supportive environment;

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it needs to be a safe haven for the child,' she says.

Ellyn Satter says that obesity can in many ways be viewed as a handicapping condition. 'However, unlike other handicapping conditions, it is blamed on the sufferer,' she says. 'It is hard to raise an emotionally healthy obese child in today's weight-prejudiced society.'<sup>33</sup>

Of course one of the best ways for parents to help children deal with their concerns about body image and weight is to lead by example. If you are confident and happy about your own body and look after yourself, it will be easier for your children to do the same.

Children and teenagers may be concerned about their weight or body image even if they are not overweight. These concerns can be self-fulfilling if they lead to dieting and other unhealthy eating patterns. As well, concerns about body image can discourage girls, particularly teenagers, from participating in physical activity. All children, from an early age, need to be supported in being confident about their body and their physical abilities.

Ellyn Satter has some more sensible advice on this subject: 'We can help preserve children's ability to eat in a positive and healthful way, we can help preserve their joy in moving their bodies, we can love them without reservation or criticism, and we can thereby support them in feeling good about themselves. But we can't make them thin.'

Thinness most definitely should not be the goal. As much as the glossy magazines would have us believe that thin is beautiful, children will be better off if they grow up knowing that true beauty lies in feeling healthy, strong, confident and happy.

## **Disconnection**

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'I really like your yellow dress,' Dr Tony Grant tells me over coffee one day. It makes me feel really uncomfortable. We are sitting at a café at the University of Sydney, where he heads a coaching psychology unit. Whenever I try to change the tack of the conversation, Grant comes back to my yellow dress. Actually I am wearing black trousers and a black top patterned with pink and red hearts.

Grant is trying to help me understand what it feels like to have someone completely disregard your understanding of reality. It's such a simple experiment, but it had a powerful effect; I didn't trust what Grant was saying, but I also began to doubt myself. Maybe I really was wearing yellow...

I had asked Grant for his advice about what parents should say to an overweight child who raises the issue of their weight.

On the one hand, you don't want to exacerbate or reinforce their anxiety.

On the other hand, little white lies—'You're not fat, darling'—are not helpful either, says Grant. They can undermine children's confidence in their own understanding of themselves and the world.

'Kids realise there is a split between what mummy says and what other kids say,' he says. 'They think, *If I am wrong about this, then maybe I am wrong about other stuff*'.

## **How one family changed**

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When one family decided to seek help for their young daughter's weight problem, it led to many small changes to their daily routines which added up to a significantly more healthy lifestyle for

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everyone. David and Kim Aislabie, from Newcastle in New South Wales, were already concerned about 8-year-old Katelyn's obesity when they read about a new program to combat childhood obesity.

It was being offered as part of a study by the University of Newcastle and the University of Wollongong known as HIKCUPS (the Hunter and Illawarra Kids Challenge Using Parent Support). The 10-week program provided education to parents and enjoyable physical activities for the children.

As a result, the Aislabie family now spend less time in front of the TV. Most nights they now have dinner at the table, and they spend more time on their meals than when they ate in front of the box. It's not just because they're eating more slowly; they're also chatting more.

The family is now less likely to eat out, and is more careful about reading the food labels when shopping. David also spends more time going on walks or bike rides with Katelyn. 'For me, it's been a re-education process,' he says. 'Even with portion sizes—we used to give her an adult portion. Because she could eat it doesn't mean we should have given her that much.'

David and Kim have tried not to focus on Katelyn's weight, but are pleased that she has trimmed down. More importantly, within several weeks of starting the program, Katelyn was participating in PE at school for the first time. David says they have noticed 'major, major changes' in their daughter. 'She is absolutely more confident with physical activity and her co-ordination skills have improved out of sight,' he says.

David says the lifestyle changes have been good for everyone in the family, including Katelyn's two young brothers. 'I see other kids who could benefit, but it's a really hard thing to broach with other parents,' he says.

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Dr Janet Warren, Senior Research Dietitian at the University of Newcastle, says feedback about the study has been extremely positive. 'Parents and teachers have commented that the children are showing a new enthusiasm for physical activity as their skills and confidence levels increase,' she says.

'By providing practical support programs on fitness and nutrition for overweight children, we can break the cycle of childhood obesity progressing to adulthood.'