

This is the unedited version of a feature which appeared in the Sun Herald newspaper in Sydney on 3 June 2007. The published article was shorter.

Main story plus two breakouts:

STOP BLAMING CHILDREN: OBESITY IS EVERYONE'S PROBLEM

By Melissa Sweet, author of *The Big Fat Conspiracy: how to protect your family's health*

One mother waged a long campaign to stop her son's child care centre dispensing Fruit Loops and Coco Pops for morning tea. A father told of his frustration at lollies routinely being used as rewards in his children's classrooms. Another father described his shock at discovering McDonald's was sponsoring the Little Athletics meeting where he'd taken his sons for some healthy fun.

When researching my book about childhood obesity, I heard so many stories from parents about the obstacles they face in trying to ensure healthy, active lifestyles for their children. "I want to do the right thing by my kids but it's so hard" was a common complaint.

So many forces in the modern world conspire to make it difficult for families to eat well and be physically active that it's not surprising children are getting fatter right around the world, even in many developing countries.

These forces include everything from the abundance of weight-promoting foods to our love affair with cars, increasing work demands, social trends such as the growing number of older parents, the proliferation of labour-saving technologies, family-unfriendly urban planning, and the huge marketing industry targeting children.

It seems very unfair to blame parents or children for stacking on the kilos, when many powerful interests are working towards exactly that result.

Those who want to nail parents for the childhood obesity problem often speak out of ignorance or prejudice - they have not studied the evidence coming in from around the world about the impact of the modern environment on health, and they see fat as a sign of personal failing.

Others making such comments often have a vested interest in describing the issue as one of individual choice and responsibility – and thus deflecting attention from

their own role. This group includes governments that are reluctant to make hard decisions about town planning and transport policies or television advertising to children. And industries that spend a fortune flogging junk foods to kids.

Even health professionals, with all their expert knowledge and authority, can find themselves overwhelmed by the fattening forces of modern life.

Mr Alan Barclay, a Sydney dietitian with a special interest in diabetes, wants his sons Marcus, 11, and Michael, 8, to have the same opportunities for physical activity that he enjoyed as a child.

He finds it terribly ironic that safety concerns often deny his boys that opportunity, citing how Michael's primary school has no playground equipment, only recently installed bike racks for older students, and only allows children to run and play outside under adult supervision.

Mr Barclay couldn't believe it when a sports day was recently cancelled because the grass was wet.

"I thought 'you've got to be joking'," says Mr Barclay. "I presume it was some risk aversion strategy but, for God's sake, everyone would have laughed if you'd suggested such a thing when I was a kid.

"Part of growing up is slipping and sliding on the grass. To cancel a whole activity for the day over wet grass just typifies this whole wrapping up of children in cotton wool."

Mr Barclay would like Michael to cycle to school but this is not allowed as bicycle racks are not provided for his year. Instead, Mr Barclay is one of the few parents in his local area, Padstow Heights, to walk his child to school.

"Everyone drives because they're fearful of the children crossing the road," he says. "But it's a real chicken and the egg scenario. There's a real problem in that whole mindset about children's safety that needs to be addressed."

Many experts believe we also need to refocus the obesity spotlight. This might sound a little strange coming from someone who's just written a book on the subject, but it's time we stopped talking so much about "children's" obesity.

One problem with this approach is that it portrays obesity as being somehow

children's fault - when really it's a problem of the adult world, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, if a child is overweight or inactive or eating poorly, it is a pretty safe bet that others in the family might also benefit from moving more and eating better. Rather than focusing on the individual child's behaviour, it will be far more helpful if the family environment changes, to make it easier for everyone to stay at a healthy weight.

As well, it can be counterproductive to make a child's weight the focus of everyone's attention. Making children and teenagers anxious and guilty about their weight may just give them a weight problem by encouraging unhealthy eating patterns such as dieting (see breakout).

Nor is it fair to put all the responsibility on individual families to change their ways as many of the forces shaping their environment are beyond their control.

Others who need to start taking some responsibility for tackling obesity include employers and those who work in local government and influence town planning decisions, or in the advertising industry flogging junk foods, or who set transport policies, or who build housing developments which leave no room for children's outdoor play.

It's also important to remember that one of the reasons we want to prevent childhood obesity is because we want to reduce the incidence of obesity in adulthood, when the associated health problems really kick in.

While tubby kids are more likely to grow into tubby adults, many overweight adults were not overweight as kids. In other words, to really reduce the harms associated with obesity, we also need to focus on keeping adults at a healthy weight.

Putting the spotlight on adults will likely also have a spin off for children, who are a bit like sponges, soaking up what they see their parents doing. Parents who enjoy eating well and being active are more likely to have children who do the same.

But there is a wealth of evidence that many parents probably are not as helpful as role models as they might think. Studies have shown that most people underestimate how much they eat ("the eye-mouth gap"), think their diet is

healthier than it really is (“dietary optimism”), and overestimate how active they are (“the foot-brain gap”).

In other words, many parents are not active enough or eating well enough to benefit either their own or their children’s health.

Rather than focusing so heavily on children’s obesity, we should all be thinking much more broadly - not just about the health of parents but also about how the modern environment is tipping our scales. Everyone has a part to play in tackling “the big fat conspiracy of modern life”.

• **Melissa Sweet is the author of *The Big Fat Conspiracy: How to protect your family’s health* (ABC Books, \$32.95).**

Breakout 1: Exploiting the pleasure principle

Few aspects of our lives arouse more complex and deep emotions than food and its associated rituals. A thousand tortured soap operas could be written about our relationships with food and eating.

People cook for each other to show their love and affection. They may also be attempting 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.

For most people most of the time, however, food is associated with a far more positive experience - pleasure. A hedonistic streak runs deep in most of us. Some may think of food as little more than fuel, but most people are seeking something far more gratifying when wielding 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 they understand these things.

But they are unlikely to change what they eat purely on the basis of whether a food is healthy. A far more effective strategy is to try and ensure that the consumption of healthy foods is associated with pleasure and good times.

Research has found that children and adolescents who have a healthy diet generally do so because they like the food they are eating. The researchers suggested that promoting foods' taste and flavour, rather than their healthy qualities, will be most effective at encouraging consumption.

Meanwhile, other research has shown that children learn to dislike foods when they are offered rewards for eating those foods. Telling children 'eat your vegetables and you can have a treat' is a double whammy; it teaches that vegetables are no fun, while reinforcing the attraction of so-called treats.

One of the best ways to convince children that healthy foods taste good is for their parents and "significant others" in their lives to really enjoy eating them. The worst thing that could happen is for healthy foods to become associated in children's minds with self-deprivation, punishment or feeling miserable.

The pleasure principle is also important when it comes to promoting physical activity. Much of the current focus on pushing kids into sport may be counterproductive if they don't enjoy the experience.

This is especially important for children who are overweight or not confident of their physical prowess. They need the opportunity to learn and master the skills helpful for physical activity in a supportive environment. 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.

Many experts believe that rather than pushing sport, we should be helping kids to be more physically active in their daily lives, whether by playing games, walking the dog, or washing the car.

This approach creates many more opportunities for children to burn off energy and allows for physical activity to be accumulated in short bursts throughout the day, which is more in line with their natural patterns of behaviour.

Taking a broad view of what constitutes physical activity also makes it easier to entrench as part of the everyday routines of families, especially if this means walking to the shop to buy the milk and papers rather than hopping in the car.

This is particularly important as some research suggests that children's fitness is in decline because of reduced incidental activity rather than because of declining levels of participation in sport or other organised activities.

Breakout 2: Dieting a sure way to develop a weight problem

It is surely no coincidence that an obesity epidemic has arisen at the same time as has a flourishing weight loss industry promoting an epidemic of dieting.

Dieting inevitably leads to overeating, even in experiments on animals, and has been shown by many studies to be associated with an increased risk of weight gain.

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 inevitably proves difficult and leads to bingeing, which makes them feel guilty, which makes them eat more, which makes them worry about their weight - and so the circle continues.

These eating patterns often lead to weight fluctuations, which make it physiologically and psychologically more difficult to keep the weight off.

One of the problem's with this vicious circle is that it 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 this begins very early in girls' life, even before they are old enough to go to school.

Dieting is particularly unhelpful for children as restricting their energy intake when their bodies are still growing has the potential to adversely affect their growth and development.

It may also encourage unhealthy and obsessive relationships with food and poor self-image. Teenage girls who diet are more likely to feel worthless and to be depressed and socially anxious. They are also more likely to be dissatisfied with

their bodies and to be heavier.

Rather than encouraging children to worry about their weight, parents should set an example - by not obsessing about their own shape or size. If they put away the bathroom scales, forget about fad diets and focus on enjoying plenty of vegetables and fruit as part of a balanced menu and active lifestyle, they will also be doing their children a favour.

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