



# **ANA ISSUE BRIEF**

*Information and analysis on topics affecting nurses,  
the profession and health care.*

## **Fighting Childhood Obesity Taking a stand to control an epidemic one child at a time**

### **Key Points**

Childhood obesity—defined as when an individual's weight is very disproportionate to height—is one of the most serious public health threats of this century.

Professional nurses are instrumental in collaborating with families, communities, and other health professionals to eliminate this hazard and restore a healthy future to America's children.

### ***Facts show an alarming trend of obesity, costs, and health outcomes***

There are approximately 13 million obese children in the United States, and the rate of childhood obesity has risen significantly from 14.8% in 2003 to 16.4% in 2007. Unlike some disorders that children are believed to outgrow, eight out of ten obese children become obese adults.

There are a myriad of health risks associated with obesity, including heart disease, hypertension, and type II diabetes. Obese children are being diagnosed with one or even several of these disorders that used to be only rarely seen in pediatric populations.

Obesity presents a huge financial cost. Treating and caring for obese children alone is estimated to have a price tag of \$14 billion annually, and with a majority of these children becoming obese adults, their health costs will continue and possibly escalate even more in adulthood. This puts immense financial pressure on individual families and third-party payers.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Sharing Responsibility***

As a nation, it is our responsibility to educate and motivate our youth to good health. The healthcare sector is collaboratively accountable along with members of the community and lawmakers to act promptly so that future risk of this epidemic will be avoided.

Professional nurses witness first-hand the effects of childhood obesity as they treat children in emergency rooms, primary care offices, school clinics and other settings. Preventing disease and promoting healthy lifestyles are standards of nursing practice— fundamental to almost everything nurses do in patient and community education.

The ANA believes if America does not mount a concentrated effort to control childhood obesity, the American child will have a life span that is years less than any previous American generation.



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### ***Risk Factors and Barriers to a Healthy Weight***

Although the childhood obesity epidemic crosses many races, ethnicities, neighborhoods, and socioeconomic statuses, some populations are more vulnerable than others. The children most at risk of being obese are publicly insured, come from low income families, reside in southeastern states, and are Black, Hispanic, or of American Indian descent.<sup>2</sup>

Links have been made between obesity and lack of access to affordable, available nutritious foods. Many vulnerable children live in areas that lack supermarkets, causing families to rely on convenience stores, “bodegas”, and fast food restaurants where there is limited choice for fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and other healthy foods. There are also limited parks and recreational areas for exercise, and in areas where there are these facilities, some are not safe for children to play unsupervised.<sup>2</sup>

### ***How are nurses contributing to reversing this epidemic?***

***Educating***—The professional nurse is educating parents, children, families and communities about the devastating effects of childhood obesity. Nurses will continue to encourage healthy eating habits and promote adequate physical activity. School nurses are working to educate students and educational staff about the vital role both healthy eating habits and adequate physical activity play in obtaining optimal health. They are further contributing to America’s fight against childhood obesity by trying to create a culture of health in schools requiring school staff to be nutritional role models.<sup>3</sup>

***Advocating***—Nurses are advocating on behalf of the American child by supporting various policy recommendations such as funding for school wellness programs, requiring federal nutritional standards on all foods served in schools and creation of recreational facilities in underserved areas to provide increased opportunities for physical activity. Nurses are helping parents and other adults see the importance of changing their eating habits and increasing physical activities to be role models for their children.

***Partnering***— ANA is proud to partner with the White House in supporting the “Let’s Move!” initiative, launched by First Lady Michelle Obama to reverse the trends of childhood obesity in the United States. Its four main elements— healthy choices, healthy schools, physical activity, and access to affordable foods—challenges many of the risk factors to obesity and barriers to a healthy weight. As a partnership between parents, schools, communities, health care providers, and even food and beverage industries, the takes a multi-dimensional approach at promoting healthy weights and targeting many factors of childhood obesity.<sup>4</sup>



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Even some of the non-traditional health care and child advocacy groups are joining the cause. The National Football League—a group whose professional football players are admired by many children and adolescents— features the “Play 60” campaign, which encourages children to be active by challenging them to participate in some type of physical activity 60 minutes a day.<sup>5</sup>

### **Keep It Moving**

Collaborations between parents, children, communities, lawmakers and other stakeholders is required if the trends of increasing childhood obesity are to be reversed. There are many promising initiatives in place to ensure America is moving in the right direction.

Childhood obesity has been called the “new tobacco”, and parallels drawn to that great public health social and policy movement and subsequent victories in the 1990s and 2000s



and the one that we face now.<sup>6</sup>

This issue is of societal importance, and can no longer be viewed as simply an effort to get our children to lose weight. It must be a strategic mission to convince our children to make substantial lifestyle changes that will result in overall better health, and a public health effort that spans education, the health care industry, businesses, government, communities, and families.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>National Council of State Legislatures. (2010). *Childhood Obesity - 2009 legislative update of policy options*. Retrieved March 4, 2010 from <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=19776>.

<sup>2</sup>Bethell, C., Simpson, L., Stumbo, S., Carle, A. & Gombojav, N. (2010). National, state and local disparities in childhood obesity. *Health Affairs* 29(3), 347-356. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2009.076

<sup>3</sup>National Association of School Nurses. (2004). *Resolution: Vending machines and healthy food choices in schools*. Silver Spring, MD: Author.

<sup>4</sup>Lets Move. n.d. Retrieved May 4, 2010 from <http://letsmove.gov/index.html>

<sup>5</sup>National Football League. n.d. *NFL Play60 campaign*. Retrieved May 4, 2010 from <http://www.nflrush.com/play60/>.

<sup>6</sup>Klein., J.D., Dietz, W. (2010). Childhood Obesity: The new tobacco. *Health Affairs*, 29(3), 388-392.