



## KNOWLEDGE BITES- BROUGHT TO YOU BY D&M RESEARCH

Welcome to Knowledge Bites, periodic bite sized pieces of knowledge exchange, designed to be consumed immediately without ruining your appetite for the rest of the day.

### CHILDHOOD OBESITY



#### ENTRÉE

Childhood obesity is an issue of increasing concern to health authorities worldwide. In Australia, an estimated 20-25%\* of children and adolescents are overweight or obese. The incidence is particularly high amongst less affluent families.

Medical research indicates the problem is caused by increased consumption of high-fat foods prepared outside the home and reduced physical activity.

We spoke online with a group of 16 Sydney mothers from households with below-average incomes who have primary school aged children, to discover whether they agree with the research and, more importantly, who they think should tackle the problem.

We found these mothers are well aware of the problem and effects of childhood obesity. They think it is one of the most significant health issues facing society today. Mothers ascribe the problem to economic and social pressures which are difficult to resist but claim to be concerned and vigilant parents themselves.





## MAINS

### ***Are mothers aware of the epidemic and the problems it causes***

The media and their own observations of children in the playground have convinced mothers that childhood obesity is a major health issue. They know it causes physical problems, such as diabetes and restricted mobility, psychological harm, such as depression and poor body image, and social problems such as bullying. These problems continue into adulthood, shortening life expectancy, limiting the ability to work and putting excessive, costly pressure on health services.

### ***What's causing the obesity epidemic?***

These mothers attribute the obesity epidemic to social pressures, poor parenting, the fast food industry, the media, peer pressure and decreasing physical activity due to the popularity of electronic entertainment:

- Mothers believe social and economic pressures have weakened the traditional family. The need for a second household income due to high housing costs and consumerism means parents have less time to spend with their children. Family activities, such as sport and eating meals together, have diminished. Parents have less time to spend cooking. The results are that families eat more pre-prepared and fast foods, parents do not supervise their children's meals as closely and children play (sedentary) computer games rather than sport.
- Poor parenting. They think parents are primarily responsible for their children's eating habits and overall health. They should set their children an example, provide healthy food and encourage good eating habits, which they themselves try to do. Parents who do not do so are 'neglectful' and 'ignorant'.
- Fast food is an attractive, convenient option for time-poor mothers. It can also be cheaper than fresh food. Children, unsupervised, will buy fast food because of peer pressure, because it is widely advertised and they like the taste.
- The media are to blame for promoting fast food to children.
- The decline in family sporting activities and the increasing popularity of computer games means children now get less exercise. Sporting activities are also expensive. However, these mothers do encourage their children to take up sports to prevent weight gain.
- Peer pressure encourages children to eat fast food to be 'cool'.

However, some mothers' own behaviour reveals double standards which suggest they are not all as vigilant about preventing obesity as they claim. A family 'norm' of being overweight, the appeal of fast food to adults, mothers' feelings of helplessness to deal with a complex situation, the projection of the causes of the problem (and therefore the solution) onto 'them' – neglectful, ignorant parents, the government, schools, the media, fast food outlets - suggest that some parents are unwilling to 'own' the problem and give up because it is all too hard.



Several of the mothers are overweight themselves and dissatisfied with their body image. They have usually tried, unsuccessfully, to lose weight but protest that they do not want their children to inherit their problems. But these mothers usually have overweight families<sup>^</sup>, suggesting that they are not as diligent as they claim about watching what their children eat.

Mothers also like 'junk' food themselves. While they are rejecting it in principle for their children, it is a quick and convenient way to feed a family. Adults like the taste and readily eat it, subverting the good example they intend setting for their children. As one mother remarks with disarming candour:

"...Obviously [parents should be] leading by example. What I do is eat the junk I want when the kids aren't around."

***What do mothers think are the solutions and who should tackle the problem?***

Mothers think parents are primarily responsible for tackling the problem of childhood obesity, but their suggested solutions indicate they mainly expect the initiative to come from external sources, not from themselves:

- Parents who are ignorant or neglectful should be educated about nutrition and the problems obesity causes.
- Mothers want this education to come from governments, health authorities, doctors and schools.



- Schools are already changing to healthier canteen menus, banning junk food and sending home advice on healthy eating. Mothers think this initiative could be extended.
- The government could provide classes and nutritional advisers to visit schools, clubs, health centres, preferably free.
- Families could spend more time together.
- The government could subsidise sporting fees and equipment.
- Reduced advertising for 'junk' food.
- Reduced food prices, so fresh food becomes an economic option.

However, none of these remedies would address the social and economic pressures mothers believe are behind the childhood obesity problem, suggesting that solving it demands a much more fundamental change in lifestyle and behaviour.

### SECOND HELPINGS!

**Want to know more?** We are happy to provide more details on any of the information in Knowledge Bites. To get dessert, please forward your request to Trudie at [trudie@dandmresearch.com.au](mailto:trudie@dandmresearch.com.au) or call us on 9565 2655.

You can also purchase this or any previous full reports on Knowledge Bites for \$250 plus GST.

If you would like to know more about our online focus groups, please contact our Qualitative Director, Catherine Huntington, at [catherine@dandmresearch.com.au](mailto:catherine@dandmresearch.com.au) or call her on 9565 2655.

### SAUCES

\*Australian Government: Department of Health and Ageing

^We calculated the BMI for each household member from information the respondents supplied.