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Mendaki aims to develop talent

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Teacher helps disabled through sport



# 'Arm parents so they can help kids fight flab'

## Teach children to eat, exercise right, say observers

By ANDREA ONG

BANNING advertisements that make unhealthy food appealing to children is a step forward in the fight against childhood flab – but parents are the most important line of defence, observers say.

"Parents are the ones who give the kids money to buy food and they should teach children what to buy," said clinical dietitian Jaclyn Reutens.

She believes childhood obesity must be tackled by educating both parents and children in eating well and exercising right.

Chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health Lam Pin Min also called for public education for the two groups to be enhanced.

This would help them make right choices even in the face of unhealthy food ads targeted at children, say observers.

Last weekend, the Government announced that such ads would be banned. The move is part of the national fight against rising obesity.

While the childhood obesity rate has remained stable for more than 10 years, growing affluence means it could rise in time.

Last year, 11 per cent of students – from primary schools to junior colleges and centralised institutes – were obese, said the Ministry of Education.

Previous figures put the national student obesity rate from 2000 to 2009 at about 9.7 per cent each year, but that changed after the Health Promotion Board (HPB) revised its method of measuring child and youth obesity in 2010.

The new approach looks at whether the child's body mass index (BMI) is appropriate for his or her age by comparing it to a reference population of children of the same age and gender.

A child is considered obese – severely overweight – if he falls in the 97th percentile and above.

The HPB is now targeting parents "further upstream" in the fight against obesity. Research shows that habits such as food preferences are formed by the age of five, said the agency.

HPB holds workshops for parents-to-be and young parents and provides "Healthy Start" guides that are available online.

For older children, schools and HPB also engage parents, on top of other programmes such as promoting healthier canteen food.

At Ang Mo Kio Secondary, where the obesity rate has stayed at a low 7 per cent, parents are invited to view students' projects on nutrition and physical education.

They are also educated on nutrition, said principal Abdul Mannan Mohamed Ibrahim.

Schools can also refer obese students to HPB's Student Health Centre, where parents are roped in for counselling.

Project operations planner Annie Loke, 46, attended the clinic earlier this year with her daughter Goh Wan Teng, seven, who was obese.

Madam Loke was surprised to learn that some food items like flavoured probiotics drinks and milk could actually be high in sugar.

The family has switched to



ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

### ■ HOW THE FAT PILES UP

#### What common snacks contain

	Size (g)	Calorie (k/cal)	Total fat (g)
Plain salted potato chips	227	1,230	<b>82.6</b>
Ice cream	90	146	<b>4.4</b>
Bubble tea	400	231	<b>15</b>
Fried chicken burger	210	633	<b>37.4</b>
French fries	85	274	<b>14.6</b>
Chicken wing	53	157	<b>9.9</b>
Jellybeans	43	159	<b>0</b>

#### Estimated calorie intake for a 10-year-old Asian child:

- Recommended calorie intake a day: **1,800-2,000kcal**
- Recommended fat intake a day: **50-60g total fat**

NOTE: An average 10-year-old is 144cm tall and weighs 35kg.

Source: SINGAPORE NUTRITION AND DIETETICS ASSOCIATION

GRAPHICS: MIKE M DIZON and ANDREA ONG

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### ROLE OF PARENTS

You can't escape seeing unhealthy food in stores. Parents are the ones who give the kids money to buy food and they should teach children what to buy.

– Clinical dietitian Jaclyn Reutens

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healthier options and encouraged Wan Teng to do more sports.

Parents should start by walking the talk as children look up to them as role models, said Associate Professor Lee Yung Seng, a senior consultant in paediatric endocrinology and diabetes at National University Hospital.

"Unhealthy lifestyle and eating habits can be easily picked up by children," he said.

Obese parents should also bear in mind that their children are likely to take after them. If one parent is obese, there is a 50 per cent chance of his or her children being obese, said Singapore Nutrition and Dietetics Association spokesman Kalpana Bhaskaran.

The probability shoots up to 80 per cent if both parents are obese.

Madam Loke feels parents have an important supportive role to play.

"You cannot just say, 'Exercise and don't eat this.' You have to explain why it is important. Now, Wan Teng keeps asking her father to exercise too."

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