

CHUBBY KIDS *aren't healthy kids*

by LIZ CAMPBELL

When our children are babies, we pinch their rounded cheeks and applaud their chubby legs. But what happens to that baby fat when they get older?

A recent 15-year study announced that 33 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls are overweight. Of these numbers, 10 per cent of boys and nine per cent of girls are actually obese. And this problem is increasing according to Mark Tremblay, dean of kinesiology at the University of Saskatchewan, whose research on childhood obesity is widely cited by Health Canada and other health policy makers. In fact, Canada's children are among the fattest in the world.

Tremblay believes the problem is due to several factors – our waning emphasis on physical education (several provincial governments have cut these programs significantly in schools), a lack of grassroots sports development, too much fast food, and not enough emphasis on alternate transportation like cycling or walking. And then there's television, computers, and video games which have provided more reasons for children to remain inside and sedentary, rather than outside playing street hockey.

"Society doesn't promote activity as much as we used to," says Mary Ellen Prange, a registered dietitian working with Waterloo Region Public Health. "And there's a huge amount of marketing to kids of unhealthy products."

Prange points out that packaged products, while frequently necessary for their convenience to busy parents, often provide empty calories. And eating out, which used to be a treat, has become a necessity for time-challenged families.

"We rely heavily on food which other people have prepared," she says. "So we have to be really savvy about what's in that food. We have to ask the right questions."

In addition, says Prange, schools must be more responsible about providing an environment which promotes healthy eating and active living.

Some are still offering quality physical education programs. Others are saying no to vending machines filled with junk food. Prange recognizes that these machines are a means to raise funds for schools, but she applauds those looking for healthier alternatives.

There's strong evidence that obesity is linked to a variety of health conditions including gall bladder disease; sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea; reproductive problems; arthritis and joint disorders; and several forms of cancer.

Some of the problems in adults, caused by excess weight – like hypertension and a higher risk of disorders such as type 2 diabetes (once called adult-onset diabetes) – are beginning to manifest in young people. Among 13-year olds, 19 per cent of boys and 14 per cent of girls had elevated blood pressure. Not all these children will go on to have high blood pressure, but experts maintain a substantial portion are at risk of becoming hypertensive adults if they don't make radical changes to diet and lifestyle.

One little discussed area is the self-esteem of overweight children, who are often targets for bullying and cruel jokes. In a society which apparently values fitness in males and slimmness in females, those excess pounds can leave a child feeling inadequate and lead to antisocial and introspective behaviour. Often this will lead to eating more, creating a vicious cycle.

Children need help. There are ways to treat child obesity, starting with low calorie diets. But for most children, a combination of calorie reduction and increased activity will produce positive results. This kind of lifestyle change can also lead to other benefits, including higher energy levels, an improved self-image and better stress management skills. Research has shown that the reduction of as little as 10 per cent of body weight can improve an individual's health dramatically.

Children need physical activity – swimming, skating, playing sports, even walking to and from school. Moderate physical activity of 30 minutes or more a day is one proven method



PHOTOS courtesy of Health Canada



for losing weight, especially when it's done through a combination of aerobic exercise and muscle building. Experts also recommend some simple behavioural changes. For example, parents can keep a daily record of diet and exercise for their children, as a way to identify both healthy and unhealthy patterns.

Keep unhealthy foods out of the house. Children have enough temptations to over-indulge when out with friends. As difficult as it is, Prange suggests trying to implement regular family mealtimes. Preparing meals together can provide positive learning opportunities to reinforce healthy habits.

"Feeding has become a necessity and everything positive around it is being lost," she laments. "Efficiency may not be the healthiest way. Kids need that structure."

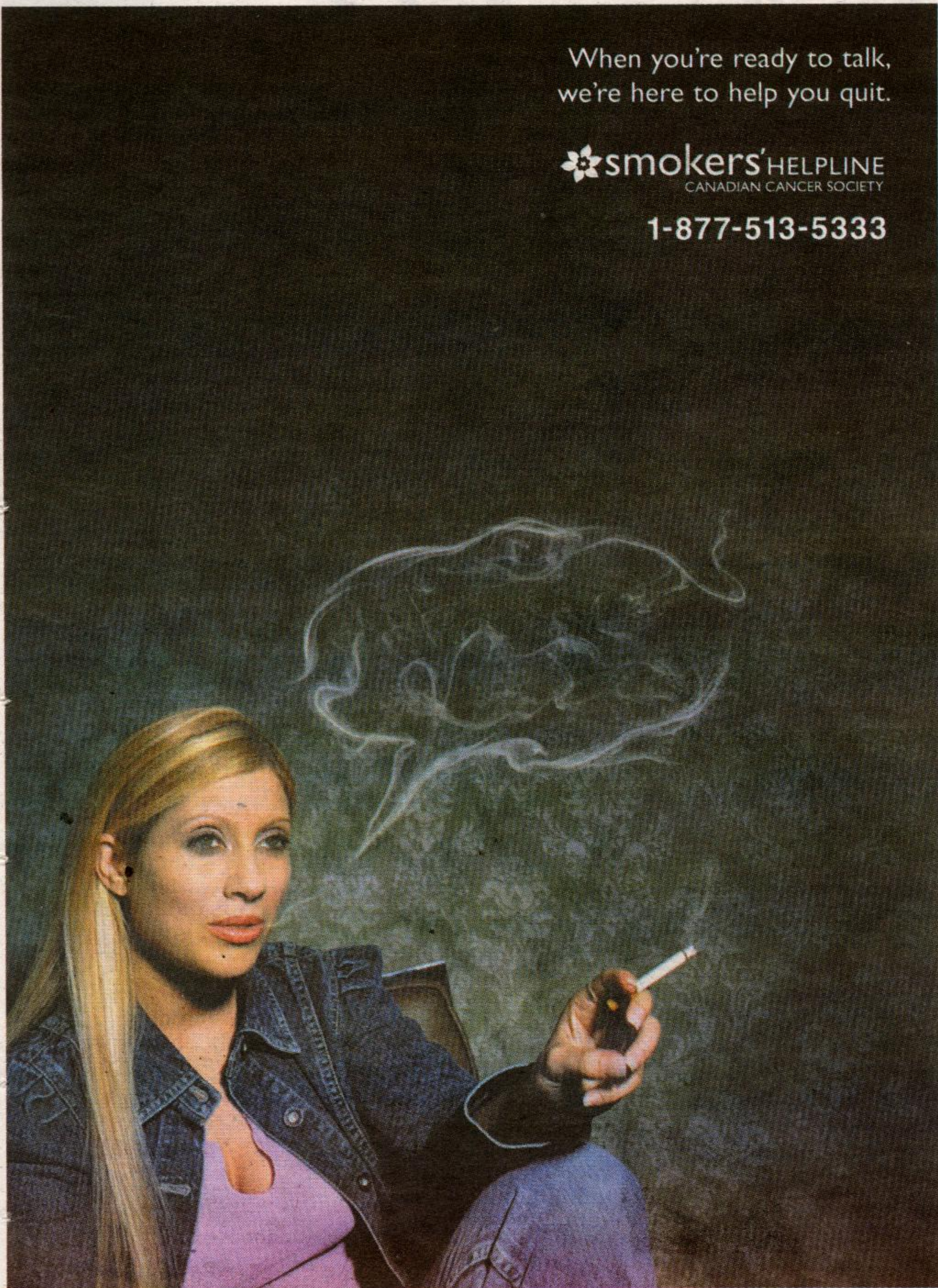
Studies show kids are more likely to succeed in a weight loss program, if they enjoy the positive support of family members. Most importantly, don't make weight loss a condition of affection or esteem. Children need to know they are loved. Parents are role models and must instill healthy habits in their children so they make the right choices when parents aren't around.

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INTERGALACTIC OBESITY BATTLES

Dietitians of Canada, in conjunction with Kellogg Canada, is bringing the space age to bear on what it calls the "obesity epidemic" in this country.

Mission Nutrition is a space-themed program of curriculum-based resources for teachers at the kindergarten to Grade 5 level, to help them create entertaining activities to explore healthy eating, physical activity and positive self-esteem in a "fun and easy way."

The program, developed with input from teachers and dietitians across the country, has created an "intergalactic nutrition team" of three characters – Captain Kip, Glubber and Handy-Bot – who have come from the far corners of the galaxy to learn about Earthlings. Through their discoveries the students can learn valuable lessons as they complete their own missions to eat well, be active and feel good about themselves.

The program also sports its own website at missionnutrition.ca, where educators, health professionals and parents can find "credible information on healthy eating,

active living and building positive self-esteem in children aged five to 14," says DC's vice-president of development, Helen Haresign. "Leading experts in child and adolescent nutrition, physical activity, psychology and health education have contributed to developing this website."

Targeting youngsters with lessons on healthy eating and lifestyle habits is a two-pronged campaign in the ongoing obesity battle.

"Health promoting habits developed in youth are our best hope for reducing obesity and related chronic illness in later years," says the Toronto-based organization. And it recognizes that excess weight in children is a major and growing problem in today's society.

The importance of healthy eating and activity "where children learn, live and play" will also be the focus of the association's National Nutrition Month campaign next March.

More information can also be found at DC's own website, dietitians.ca and at Kellogg Canada's site, kelloggs.ca/nutrition.