

BACK TO SCHOOL GOOD TIME TO ENCOURAGE HEALTHIER HABITS, PEDIATRIC SOCIETY ADVISES

# CHILDHOOD OBESITY WEIGHS ON SOCIETY

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

**H**er daughter is intelligent, creative and playful.

But the Aurora mom gets tears in her eyes when she discusses her preschooler's weight.

"She's very big for her age and I worry about the life she'll have, the horrible comments that kids and even adults feel they have the right to make about her," said the woman, who did not want to be identified.

"Of course, I worry about the health effects from carrying all that extra weight. But it's not like my kid just sits around all day eating potato chips. She plays all the time.

"I think about what will happen when she gets into school. Kids can be cruel. Will they look past the weight and see what a great kid she is?"

The little girl is not alone. According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, a quarter of Canadian children are now considered obese and the number is on the rise.

**D**exter Nieman, a member of the society's healthy active living committee, says back to school is the perfect time for parents, educators and society to focus on the issue.

With youngsters back in the classroom for much of the day, he urged people to think of innovative ways to keep children active from September to June.

At the same time, Dr. Nieman said parents should consider the foods they are packing in kids' lunchbags and schools should think about whether pizza lunches, vending machines in the halls and the fatty foods they serve in cafeterias are in children's best interests.

"Kids across the land are gaining weight like crazy. Is there a cost to having obese, inactive kids? The answer is, very clearly, yes," he said, arguing obesity is linked to health risks such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, some cancers, depression, self-esteem problems and even suicides.

"At what point does this issue become a public health debate like smoking? If you bring it down to the bottom line, what we're trying to do is get kids physically active. Not to make them Olympic athletes, but to get them physically active."

However, while Dr. Leora Pinhas, director of Southlake Regional Health Centre's regional eating disorders program, is in



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

favour of healthier kids, she worries society's obsession with weight is creating more anorexic and bulimic children.

She points to last year's study by Toronto's University Health Network, which showed 27 per cent of teenage girls in Ontario are at risk of an eating disorder.

According to the pediatric society, obesity in Canadian children tripled between 1981 and 1996.

About 40 per cent of obese children and 70 per cent of obese teens will become obese adults.

Arguing heredity accounts for less than 30 per cent of juvenile obesity, the society said the culprits are poor eating habits and inactivity encouraged by TV, computers and video games.

Dr. Nieman acknowledged there are many hurdles to childhood fitness.

Everything from busy parents and mom and dad's anxiety about letting their children play outside unattended to bigger restaurant portions that feature fries with every kid's meal, the amount of homework some children bring home and kids' fascination with all things electronic can serve as excuses.

But Dr. Nieman said there are long-term consequences to ignor-

## FAST FACTS

- 50 per cent of children and youth are not active enough for optimal growth and development;
- Girls are less active than boys;
- 15 per cent of Grade 6 students consume French fries daily; 24 per cent eat candy or chocolate daily;
- Canadian children watch an average of 15.5 hours of TV a week, while teens watch more than 14 hours;
- There was a 200-per-cent increase in fast-food restaurant visits between 1977 and 1995;
- Obese children need 20 per cent more energy than children of normal weight.

ing the "obesity epidemic".

"Obesity is a long-term thing. It's like alcoholism. You're never going to rid of it, but you can control it."

He urged parents and school boards to be innovative when looking for ways to get kids active again.

**F**or example, some Edmonton parents whose children are bused convinced the school board to drop their youngsters off a few blocks from school so they could

walk.

"My goal would be very simple; if we could make Canadian kids the most active in the world, I would be very, very happy," Dr. Nieman said.

Heather Sears, a health and physical education curriculum consultant for the York Region District School Board, said back to school is a good time to focus on children's activity levels.

"Research tells us, even research that has been gathered by teachers in our board, when students are involved in vigorous physical activity, it improves their concentration," Ms Sears added.

Ms Sears said the board takes children's activity levels seriously, pointing out more than 1,000 teachers participated in 88 physical education workshops in the past year.

She also supports the province's curriculum, which calls for all students to take part in sustained physical activity daily. That's five to 10 minutes for children in Grade 1 and a minimum of 15 minutes for teens in Grade 8.

Ms Sears said the provincial curriculum also requires children to be active through other means.

Board spokesperson Ross Virgo agreed physical education is

extremely important for children, but complained the demanding provincial curriculum prohibits cutting into academics with more gym classes.

Dr. Pinhas is concerned our desire to get kids healthy may swing the pendulum too far to the other side.

She agrees encouraging children to be more active is a good idea, as long as activity doesn't become a regimented chore.

"Kids have gotten less physically active over the years. Play time has been replaced with screen time," Dr. Pinhas said.

"But that doesn't mean you get kids running on treadmills or taking aerobics classes to lose weight. Exercise in moderation is important to everyone's health. But all you have to do is throw a kid in the backyard and they'll play."

Where Dr. Pinhas gets concerned is when the debate about overweight children turns to their appetite.

She argued children have a natural ability to regulate how much food they eat.

But adults often destroy that internal saturation gauge by insisting youngsters have a few more bites or clean their plates or, conversely, by restricting food because they are worried about their children's weight.

**C**hildren whose food is restricted will often turn to bingeing or stealing junk food. Dr.

Pinhas stressed there is no reason for children under the age of 18 to be on diets to lose weight. Diets don't work anyway, she argued, because 90 per cent of dieters will regain the weight they lose.

At most, parents should try to keep their children's weight stable until their height catches up.

"Diets are not the way to go, I can say this unequivocally," said Dr. Pinhas, who disputes research indicating all overweight people are at an elevated risk for health problems.

"Being overweight at 18 won't kill you, but a serious eating disorder might."

Dr. Pinhas said the best way to ensure kids' health is to take a balanced approach.

"We've lost all sense of what's normal and moderate. You can never be too thin' is society's mantra," she said.

"But it's OK to have dessert, as long as you have broccoli. It's OK to watch TV if you exercise moderately three times a week."

The Canadian Pediatric Society's website is [www.cps.ca](http://www.cps.ca).

Fall Sale

Quality  
Fine Home Furnishings

Fall Sale

4747 Highway #7 East  
(East of Kennedy in Unionville)  
Tel. (905) 477-5524  
[www.almira.com](http://www.almira.com)  
[sales@almira.com](mailto:sales@almira.com)

ALMIRA  
&  
FURNITURE & INTERIORS

Store Hours:  
Mon. - Wed.: 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.  
Thu. - Fri.: 10 a.m. - 9 p.m.  
Saturday: 10 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.  
Sunday: Closed