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Implementing a Weight Loss Program for Overweight Children and Their Parents

– Ronald Williams, MD, a pediatrics and internal medicine specialist at Penn State Children's Hospital, recommends six, easy steps towards a healthier lifestyle for overweight children and their parents. We encourage parents to follow these steps with their overweight child:

Step 1: Diet liquids

Step 2: Drink water before meals / decrease portions

Step 3: Healthier cooking

Step 4: Exercise

Step 5: Positive reinforcement

Step 6: Physician/nutrition follow-up

Step 1: Diet liquids

- * All liquids are now diet
- * Switch to healthy beverages such as:
 - Skim or 1% milk
 - Juices (V8, Tomato, 100% juice)–4 oz per day maximum
- * Avoid:
 - Artificial Waters (Fruit2O, Propel)
 - Diet Sodas
 - Other beverages containing high fructose corn syrup or sugar or artificial sweeteners (Crystal Light, Snapple, Hi-C)

Step 2:

- * Drink water before meals/decrease portions
- * Drink a full glass of water at the start of each meal and immediately eat
- * Adding a slice of lemon to the water improves taste and makes it more interesting to drink
- * Drinking 8 to 16 ounces of water just before eating each meal tricks the stomach. By partially filling the stomach with zero calories before the meal even starts, drinking water helps decrease or eliminate feeling hungry, especially when cutting back on meal size. Remember to eat immediately after drinking. This allows the food to absorb the water and helps you feel full for a longer time.
- * Decrease meal size 15 percent across the board
- * All meals should have 15 percent less food on the plate.
- * Eyes say the child is hungry—stomach says child is full. Encourage child to learn to listen to his or her stomach.
- * If child is still hungry, s/he can have some more but must leave table for 20 minutes first.

Step 3: Healthier cooking

- * Cook all meats in a way that fat can drip away
- * Broiling or grilling has the least number of calories. It preserves taste but with lower calorie and fat intake.
- * Baking melts fat into other foods and frying adds calories.
- * Take all skin off chicken and turkey.
- * Read package labels and avoid additives
- * Cook fresh food rather than buying pre-packaged food.

Step 4: Exercise

- * Start a gentle exercise program to instill confidence and build a habit.
- * Begin with two to three minutes a day, seven days a week. Each week, increase time 30 seconds until reaching 20 minutes per day. Also, make sure work out is aerobic (dance to fast music, Tae Bo tapes, exercise equipment, walk fast).
- * **Find exercise that can be done with others – swim team, sports, etc. 3–7 times a week for lifelong good habits and enjoyment**

Step 5: Positive reinforcement – This is the most important step!

- * Daily rewards for completing the above steps
- * Give a prize (no food and can't break the bank) for doing the program daily (ex. allowing child to stay up 15 minutes later at bedtime).
- * Caution about negative reinforcement (no attention to an undesired behavior, no arguments).
- * Parents get rewarded for doing the program too.

Monthly Suggestions / Additions

First month:

- * Initial weight loss goal for those with secondary medical problems: 12 – 1 pound/2wks.
- * Reinforce the general principles of the weight loss program:
 - If weight loss occurs, give lots of praise
 - If weight gain occurs, investigate the cause.
- * Don't forget to find something for lifelong active exercise with others

Second month:

Tip: Encourage child to leave a small, visible amount of food on the plate to throw away each meal. This visually reminds them that they don't have to finish everything on the plate and helps battle the "I see it therefore I must eat it" mentality most of us have.

- * Reduce meal size another 5 percent across the board.
- * Cut visits to restaurants or carry-out in half.
- * If having a snack each day, limit to 100 calories.
- * Discuss stressful eating and minimize its impact.
- * Continue to reinforce diet liquids and daily exercise program.
- * Don't forget to find something for lifelong active exercise with others

Third month:

- * Reduce meal size another 5 percent each visit.
- * Continue to increase the exercise program up 30 seconds per week toward 20 minutes per day.
- * Give lots of praise for what child is doing right with the program.
- * Be creative to help find solutions for difficult portions of the program for the child.
- * Don't forget to find something for lifelong active exercise with others

Fourth month:

- * Continue to follow and refine the program to fit patient's life style.
- * If weight loss stops, start focusing on healthier, lower-calorie food choices and on calorie restrictions.
- * May also have one or two more 5 percent reductions in portion size over time, if necessary.
- * Don't forget to find something for lifelong active exercise with others

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with additions and changes by C. Eve J.
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