

Neighborhoods Play a Role in Fighting Childhood Obesity

Unhealthy eating habits and a lack of physical exercise have created a dire situation among our youth. The statistics are worrisome to say the least – one in every three Nebraska students in grades K-12 is either at risk for becoming overweight or is already overweight. Research shows that overweight children become overweight adults. In Nebraska, three in every five adults (60.9%) are either overweight or obese.

Studies show that the majority of overweight kids already have at least one avoidable risk factor for heart disease. And, obesity is the single most significant factor in the dramatic increase of Type II diabetes in children and adolescents. The health effects associated with being overweight during childhood and adolescence are considerable and related to increased morbidity and mortality later in life, which has led to the prediction by some experts that the youth of today will live less healthy and shorter lives than their parents.

There is much that can be done in the home to help prevent or reverse child obesity, such as proper portion control and following the 5-4-3-2-1 daily prevention rule of: 5 fruits and vegetables; 4 glasses of water; 3 servings of low fat dairy; no more than 2 hours screen time; and 1 hour of physical activity. However, as obesity research advances, it is beginning to recognize the important impact that the built environment – the man-made aspects of communities – also has on both physical activity and eating patterns.

Key built environment factors include sidewalks, bike paths, street layout, recreational spaces – both indoor and outdoor, proximity of offices and stores within walking distance of homes, safety of communities, urban sprawl and availability of neighborhood stores and restaurants offering healthy food choices.

As such, neighborhoods play an important role in promoting health among our children. For instance, neighborhoods can organize a walking school bus, clean up a vacant lot for kids to play, make sure that existing playgrounds and walking paths are safe and easily accessible, and start a community garden – all of which will promote physical activity and healthier eating habits.

Activate Omaha Kids is a community-wide coalition of concerned leaders and organizations in the metro area that came together in 2007 to fight childhood obesity in our communities. Their mission states that by 2011 all Omaha children will achieve measurable improvements in nutrition, physical activity and healthy living supported by community collaboration and the environments in which they live. To date, over 200 community volunteers and more than 90 organizations are helping implement several initiatives that will directly fight childhood obesity among our youth, including implementing walking school buses, improving structured recess, the mapping of access to healthy foods, organizing Club Possible afterschool programs, and conducting a survey of Douglas County kids to assess their physical activity level and eating habits.

Activate Omaha Kids would like to learn about what your neighborhood needs to support healthier living among our kids and/or what you are already doing to support physical

activity and healthy eating. For more information on Activate Omaha Kids or to learn more about how you can become involved in fighting childhood obesity, please visit www.activateomahakids.org or contact Mikki Frost at mikki.frost@alegent.org.