

When fundraising threatens kids' health

By Holley Wysong, RD, CDE

In another era, kids peddled stuff door to door for Scouts and school fundraisers. Nowadays, safety concerns have scuttled that practice. Responsible fundraisers caution kids never to go out soliciting unsupervised.

But the recognition that children's well-being is more important than money hasn't extended to fundraising by selling unhealthy snacks. With children's obesity increasing by 30 percent over the past decade - and still rising fast, along with related devastating health consequences - it's time to sound the alarm.

As one ominous example: Type II diabetes used to be called "adult-onset." Now the disease, which is closely linked with obesity, appears in children as young as 5.

A list of the health problems afflicting 21st-century childhood makes it clear: Those campus Coke machines that help pay for football uniforms, and even Mom's bake-sale brownies, are as risky as sending a 7-year-old out to peddle raffle tickets around the neighborhood.

Along with diabetes, overweight children are more likely to suffer bone and joint problems, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, insulin resistance, asthma, sleep apnea, and psychological problems.

"We are seeing kids as young as 6 years old with diabetes, hypertension, kidney involvement and liver involvement," Dr. Naznin Dixit, an Arizona pediatric endocrinologist, told the Tucson, Ariz., Citizen. "It's like a 6-year-old going on 60."

Diabetes complications can include blindness, heart disease, kidney failure, stroke and amputations. "If a child becomes diabetic at age 15, then there's a good chance, if it's not controlled

properly, that before age 40 there will be damage to the kidneys and the eyes," Vincent Poitout, a scientist at the Pacific Northwest Research Institute in Seattle, told the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

Obesity is a much greater problem, and takes a greater health toll, in minority communities, according to the national Centers for Disease Control.

The reasons for increased obesity aren't hard to spot. Supersizing, fast foods and inactivity factor in. And soft drinks make up almost one quarter of the caloric intake of kids ages 2 to 19, the American Journal of Public Health reports. The average teenage boy drinks the equivalent of 868 cans of soda a year, adds the Academy of General Dentistry.

Yes, kids need more exercise too. But obesity can make exercise difficult, uncomfortable and embarrassing. Drinking soda may also increase young people's risk of breaking bones when they're active, according to a Harvard School of Public Health study.

The proliferation of school soda machines to fundraise for sports teams raises a particularly touchy question: Should the health of the entire student body be jeopardized to raise money for the relatively few kids in team sports?

If money is the issue, fundraising with junk food costs dearly in the long run. From 1979 to 2000, the annual price of treating obesity-related conditions in children ages 6 to 17 soared from \$35 million to \$127 million (in 2001 dollars).

There are more reasons why kids' health advocates have soured on sweets as fundraisers:

-- Obese people are significantly more likely to die of cancer, a major new study confirms.

Obesity may account for 14 percent of cancer deaths in men and 20 percent in women.

-- High blood pressure now afflicts children as young as 6.

-- Obese kids give their quality of life as low a rating as do children on chemotherapy.

-- Sweets -- including the sugar and acid in soda -- contribute to tooth decay. And the 20-ounce screw-top bottles found in many school vending machines encourage kids to carry sodas around, sipping for a prolonged period, which is worse for teeth than gulping in one sitting.

-- Snacks and sodas displace healthy foods from kids' diets. In the 1970s, teens consumed far more milk than soft drinks. By the 1990s, teens were drinking twice as much soda as milk.

Kids pay the price for the sweets and soda that surround them not just in a couple of cavities or a few pounds. It's likely to be a lifetime of obesity and chronic disease - and a shorter lifetime, at that. As Dr. Ranveig Elvebakk, a San Francisco physician specializing in obesity, puts it: "The younger you are, and the more obese you are, the more years of life you lose at the end."

It's time to lobby for adequate school funding, and to find other ways to raise extra money. When we fundraise by pushing snacks and sodas, our kids pay too high a price.

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