

A silhouette of a child wearing a soccer jersey with the number 6 on the back, holding a soccer ball. The background is a light green gradient with white diagonal lines.

# HAPPY & HEALTHY

As the childhood obesity problem reaches epic proportions in America, school counselors can help overweight students achieve personal and academic success.

BY JULIA V. TAYLOR

**O**besity is a growing problem among American students that doesn't appear to be slowing down. As our society has become increasingly sedentary – and food portions have become increasingly larger – maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle can be a constant struggle. Unfortunately, this isn't just an adult problem. America's children are “blossoming,” in not very good ways, as well.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 30 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 19 are overweight, and of those, 16 percent are clinically obese. That is nearly one in every three children. Over the past 20 years, the percentage of overweight children has more than doubled.

Being young and overweight can cause serious physical and mental risks. But isn't this a problem for the school nurses, P.E. instructors and coaches? Not necessarily. In addition to the health issues these overweight children can suffer from, there can also be a wealth of self-esteem and other mental health issues involved. Here's where the school counselors come into play.

School counselors generally aren't certified to offer medical or nutritional advice, but there are many ways we can help these children. Following are

suggested intervention and prevention measures professional school counselors can take to help an unhealthy generation of youth develop healthier attitudes toward nutrition, physical activity and self-esteem.

## Educate Parents

When it comes to helping overweight students, the first step is often helping parents. If parents aren't savvy about leading a healthy lifestyle, chances are their children aren't either. A great Web site with some basic information about diet and exercise is [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov), developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Familiarize yourself with the site, and offer a parent education seminar on using it. This site also contains a user-friendly section for kids with sound educational advice presented in a fun, interactive format.

Consider offering a parenting group focusing on modeling healthy behavior. Team up with your school nurse, who is qualified to give medical and nutritional advice. Making healthy food choices and daily exercise is a lifestyle choice that children need to see beginning at a very young age.

Help parents learn about healthy grocery store shopping by calling your

local grocer and asking about tours or healthy cooking demonstrations. Many grocery stores offer classes in “shopping healthy” and buying healthy foods on a budget. The unfortunate reality is that it's often cheaper to eat processed, packaged, high-fat foods than it is to eat fresh fruits and vegetables. Classes offered at grocery stores can help parents learn to shop sales and discover what fruits and vegetables are easy to buy in bulk and won't spoil quickly.

Another way to get the word out to parents is to write an article in your school's newsletter about the problems associated with childhood obesity and offer to help overweight students with the emotional component. School counselors can help students learn to appreciate all of the amazing things their bodies can do for them, regardless of its size, while at the same time promoting fitness, healthy eating and feeling good.

Also keep on hand a list of nutritionists, registered dietitians, medical professionals and personal trainers specializing in working with children and adolescents for those students and their parents requesting additional help.



## Work With Students

Working with students should be a two-pronged approach. Teaching them about healthy eating and the importance of physical activity is one thing, but where school counselors can perhaps do their best work is dealing with the emotional and self-esteem issues overweight children experience. Children can be cruel, and overweight children often bear the brunt of students' teasing. Helping students address the emotional issues involved in being overweight is paramount.

All students, not just overweight ones, can benefit from learning how to make healthier choices. A fun lesson to do with a small group is to accompany the students and school nurse to the cafeteria and help students learn how to make healthy choices in the cafeteria. Some schools do a great job of following nutritional guidelines with their lunch offerings. Other school cafeterias are, unfortunately, a breeding ground for obesity, with their French fries, burgers, sodas, fried foods and desserts. Also help students learn to make smart food choices when packing their own lunch. Get a bunch of paper lunch bags and have different healthy and nonhealthy choices for each food group. For example, a soft drink, a juice box, skim milk



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and water; pizza, whole wheat bread with peanut butter, a large bagel with cream cheese and a croissant with ham and cheese; carrots, French fries, celery sticks and vegetable juice; and lastly gummy snacks, an apple, an orange and a "fruit by the foot." Have students make the best choice out of each food group and pack a healthy lunch.

Some schools have "healthy eating" classes, run by the health teachers, school nurses, school counselors, PE teachers or a combination of the above. Groups such as these can focus on

teaching students how to read nutrition labels but also support the notion that everything is OK in moderation.

## Get Moving

There are a wealth of ways schools can incorporate additional physical activity into students' lives. While talking to students, ask if they want to walk and talk. Walk the perimeter of the school, or walk inside. This not only increases physical activity, but in my experience, adolescents will tell you a lot more if they aren't looking directly at you.

Talk to local gyms about funded programs for overweight children. For example, my local YMCA has a teen fit program and a program for low socioeconomic status students at risk for developing type II diabetes. For \$20 the children receive a gym membership, a medical screening, parental education to encourage family exercise and 10 weeks of personal training. Check your local gyms to see if they offer any services for overweight children.

Look into starting a Girls on the Run program at your school. This fabulous program, often done through the PTA, is a 10-week program for elementary and middle school girls that not only trains them to run a 5K at the end of the 10 weeks but also incorporates character-building lessons into the twice-weekly practices. For more information, visit [www.girlsontherun.org](http://www.girlsontherun.org).

Again, remember the power of role models and setting a positive example. In this vein, consider offering a staff exercise program. At my school last year

we did a “Let’s Get Moving” challenge between the ninth-grade campus and the main campus. We challenged one another to see who could “walk to the beach” first. Quite a few staff members included their students in on this and walked with them during lunch and/or before and after school. It was a great way to get students into the habit of exercising, provided students with healthy role models and was a fabulous way for teachers, administrators and school counselors to establish a positive rapport and support system with students.

School counselors can also help make the regularly schedule PE classes less onerous for students. In middle school especially, as students are becoming more body-conscious and often more private about their changing bodies, PE class – or at least the locker room – can be an emotional landmine. Consider posting a monitor in the locker rooms at all times to decrease incidences of emotional bullying. If possible, include curtains or pri-

vacy areas where students can change without other students watching.

Advocate for students to have more time in the locker room after PE class. At my middle school, a number of students simply don’t dress out for PE because they get sweaty, mess up their hair, ruin their makeup and then don’t have enough time after gym class to change. Most students are allowed an average of four-six minutes to get changed after PE class, and this is hardly enough time, especially for middle school girls, to dress and primp. Increasing the amount of time to get dressed after gym could significantly increase participation.

Also consider allowing all students to complete state-mandated physical fitness testing separately. Many overweight or less athletic students are hesitant to participate in these tests because they can’t perform at the same level as many of their peers. They may feel embarrassed during pull-up tests, push-up tests, crunch tests and the

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often-dreaded mile run. Allowing all students to be tested separately can reduce embarrassment and support small gains in physical activity levels.

School counselors and other educators have the opportunity to help reduce this disturbing trend of childhood obesity and sedentary lifestyles. Education, intervention and building a positive rapport can contribute to marked increases in academic performance, fewer medical problems and higher self-esteem. Keep a healthy eye on these students, and offer unconditional support. Talk to PE teachers and offer suggestions for increasing participation. Help involve staff in modeling healthy behavior. Don't offer candy rewards as behavior incentives. And lastly, build a relationship of trust and empathy with parents; they might need you the most. ☒

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*Julia V. Taylor is a middle school counselor in Wake County (N.C.) Public Schools. She can be reached at jtaylor12@wcpss.net.*

## On Our Minds

ASCA members provided feedback on childhood obesity and how school are responding. (From an online survey, August 2007.)

Does your school limit access to sodas and junk food?

Yes - 81 percent  
No - 19 percent

For those schools that do limit access, when did the limitation or ban start?

Within the past year - 26 percent  
Two-five years ago - 50 percent  
More than five years ago - 6 percent  
We've always limited it - 18 percent

Does your school have a regular program in place (besides PE classes) to help address childhood obesity?

Yes - 25 percent  
No - 75 percent

For those schools with a formal program in place, is the school counseling department involved?

Yes - 32 percent  
No - 68 percent

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