

## One Potato, Two Potato . . . French Fries . . . Couch Potato?

*By Michael H. Popkin, Ph. D.*

Our daughter, Megan, was barely walking when my mother made the comment that she seemed a little chubby. My wife and I naturally took great offense at this slight to our first-born and heretofore perfect offspring, protesting that it was only a case of baby fat. My mother quickly backed off, saying that chubby wasn't really fat, but only...well...chubby. Graciously we accepted her back-pedaling and were pretty well mollified until an hour or so later when we all settled back on the sofa after a big meal to watch TV. A few minutes into the show, a clearly obese actress appeared on the screen and my mother blurted out, "Wow, she sure is chubby."

Megan is now seventeen and there isn't a chubby bone in her athletic body. Our son, Ben, is thirteen and playing football at the flyweight of a mere 76 pounds and wishes he could somehow put on a few pounds. But they are getting to be more and more the exception. The American Obesity Association reports that about 30% of children and teens today are overweight, and about half of those qualify as obese. This is 2.5 times the rate it was just 30 years ago.

Obese kids are at higher risk for asthma, diabetes, hypertension, orthopedic problems, and a host of other health issues, not to mention being teased unmercifully by their peers. In a society that still overly glamorizes model-like physiques as the sine qua non of physical beauty, overweight children are also likely to suffer from negative self image, depression, and eating disorders. And, of course, the trouble doesn't end with childhood. These kids are at much greater risk of becoming overweight and obese adults. By that time they'll have lots of company, as the incidence of overweight adults is now almost 66%. That two-thirds of us fall into this category (I pause to pinch my love handles, wondering if I qualify or not at 6'1" and 195 pounds) makes us wonder what's been going on in our society the past 30 years that's making us so...well...chubby? You can't blame increases of this magnitude on genetics, although it's arguable that we've become a nation of teenage mutant ninja butterballs.

The evidence points more to lifestyle and diet: What we *have* become is a nation of fast food junkies munching away at French fries and other high-carb foods while frenetically on the go. Unfortunately, "on the go" in this case does not usually include exercise. At age thirteen I was usually outside playing the sport du jour (basketball, baseball, football), while nowadays my son would rather be inside on the couch mastering the latest video game. I wonder how many calories one can burn per hour of battling virtual Japanese martial arts villains?

Since I founded Active Parenting Publishers in 1983, our programs have been teaching parents the importance of healthy family activities, stressing that taking time for fun together is a great way to build relationships and teach qualities of character.

It worked in my family growing up, and I've tried hard to pass it along to my children. My dad never seemed too busy to go outside and pass the football with me, and I loved

going with him to the golf course for a round. At 84 he's still healthy enough to come to work (at Active Parenting) three days a week, and now I make time to play golf with him. And when I want to get my son away from the video games, one sure way is to offer to go outside and throw the football. I even took him and Dad to play golf recently.

My wife sets an even better example for our children. Being a runner and veteran of a dozen Peachtree Road Races, she has made exercise and good diet a part of our family lifestyle. She even taught Megan and Ben to like broccoli by serving it as an appetizer (when they were the most hungry) as they grew up, and she's made sure that our family vacations have routinely included mountain biking, hiking and other physical activities. In this era of fast food and faster living, we need to follow such examples.

Here are some more ideas for promoting healthy habits in your family:\*

- Make time for the entire family to participate in regular physical activities like walking, biking or rollerblading.
- Assign active chores such as vacuuming, washing the car or mowing the lawn to each family member.
- Encourage your child to join a sports team at school or a recreation center.
- Limit the amount of screen time your child engages in (that includes TV, video and computer time).
- Serve a healthy diet, limiting fried foods, sugar and other unhealthy products.
- Encourage your children to be part of the planning, preparation and cooking of some of their meals.
- Eat more meals together at the dinner table at regular times.
- Have healthy snack food available such as fruits, vegetables and yogurt.
- Avoid serving portions that are too large, and share overly large portions when you eat out at restaurants.
- Avoid forcing your child to eat when he/she is not hungry (If your child is losing too much weight, consult a healthcare professional).
- Limit fast-food eating to no more than once a week (and don't "supersize" it).
- Avoid using food as a reward or lack of food as a punishment.

\* These ideas are promoted by the American Obesity Association and Active Parenting

There is no real substitute for exercise and diet when it comes to teaching our kids, and ourselves, how to achieve a healthy weight and maintain it throughout life. We teach our kids how to count by playing "one potato, two potato..." Now let's teach the whole family to pass on the French fries and get off the couch. Otherwise, somebody's mother is going to be calling all of us chubby pretty soon. ■

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### ***About Michael Popkin***

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active*

*Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at [www.ActiveParenting.com](http://www.ActiveParenting.com).

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