The number of overweight children has more than doubled in the past 30 years. This problem is not just because children are taller or are eating more than in previous years. Researchers believe that they are heavier because they are less active. By learning more about energy, weight and fitness, you can help keep the children in your care healthy try setting good habits that can last the rest of their lives.

WE NEED CALORIES.

We need energy to live. We need calories for the basic activities of living: to breathe, think and talk. We need even more calories to grow, walk and run. Energy is measured in calories. Calories measure the amount of energy we get from foods and the amount of energy required for our bodies to live and grow. During early childhood, most of that energy is used for growth.

The energy we need depends on many factors: size, age, activity, gender and stage of growth and development. The bodies of young children demand calories because they are growing, developing, and spending energy at a fast rate. Because children are smaller than adults they need less total food energy. On the other hand, pound for pound, children actually need more energy and nutrition than adults do.

When our bodies get the right amount of calories needed to grow and be active, our weight should stay in a healthy range. If we consume too few calories and/or use more calories than our bodies need, we tend to lose weight. If we consume more calories than our bodies need and spend less energy being active we will probably gain weight. When these habits continue over time, a person can become overweight.

CALORIE NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Calories/Kg Body Weight</th>
<th>Calories/Day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-10</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY - Health Problems and Perceptions

Children who maintain a healthy weight early in life are more likely to continue at a healthy weight throughout adulthood. On the other hand, as an obese child ages, his or her chances of remaining obese increases.

Being overweight or obese is a risk factor for many health problems, increasing the risk of diseases like arthritis, cancer and heart disease. It is important for you to help the young children in your care to develop healthy eating and exercise patterns.
If a child is overweight or underweight, do not try to control his or her food. Children need to learn for themselves how much and when to eat. Even a small decrease in calories and a small increase in physical activity can help prevent weight gain or promote weight loss. It may take longer depending on the amount of excess weight and growth spurts.

Children can tell by the age of 6 who is overweight and who is thin. Children of all sizes need good listeners and strong support. They need to know that they are accepted and loved whatever they weigh. Help keep children’s feelings about food healthy, too. Avoid using food as a punishment or a reward. Encourage the child to express feelings and not turn to food.

Exercise is important to stay healthy and protect us against diseases like cancer, heart disease and osteoporosis. We need regular exercise to keep our muscles and bones strong. Being active also aids in weight control and helps to decrease body fat. Regular physical activity is especially important for children who need weight-bearing exercise for their skeleton to develop properly. As children grow older they need to continue to exercise in order to maintain and strengthen their bones.

Sedentary activities like watching television and playing computer games require little energy. Television viewing can also encourage snacking on high fat foods. It is estimated that one quarter of all US children watch more than 4 hours of television each day. These habits can play an important role in people becoming overweight. Limiting television viewing and time at computer games are two ways to help children to be more active and maintain a healthy weight.

Children watch what you do! As an extra bonus for you, you may benefit from the psychological effect of exercise. It appears that physical activity can help to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. Being active can improve your mood and sense of well-being and may even reduce the risk of developing depression. If your children see that you can be physically active and have fun, they are more likely to be more active, too.

Young children love to be active. It’s not hard to encourage them to do simple activities like running, dancing to your favorite music or playing tag and hopscotch. You can help make physical activity a lifelong habit by helping children take part in activities and being active yourself!

Given time and healthy eating and activity habits, children will grow into a healthy body weight over a period of months. To help any child reach or maintain a healthy weight and a healthy body, offer a wide variety of nutritious foods and snacks and keep your kids fit.
**THE BOTTOM LINE**

Health experts have set a goal to lower the number of children and adolescents who are overweight and obese, and to increase the number of children and adults who are physically active. You can do your part by setting a good example for activity and fitness. Be aware of the energy needs of children in your care.

Follow the Food Guide Pyramid for Children. It gives the number of servings young children need from each food group. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal patterns recommends serving sizes of foods so that young children will get the calories and nutrients they need to grow and be active.

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR YOUR DAILY ROUTINE**

- Walk, wheel, or bike ride more often
- Swim
- Dance
- Walk up stairs instead of taking an elevator
- Play basketball, soccer, or frisbee
- Garden
- Take a 10-minute walk in the morning, at lunch, or after snack.
- Do exercises in front of the television
- Clean the house
- Play actively with children (play tag, jump-rope, walk or throw a ball.)
You can help the children in your care maintain a healthy weight and stay active. Become aware of the weight status of children and pay attention to what and how your children are eating and playing.

Use the Food Guide Pyramid to meet the calorie needs of your children.

**CHOOSE A VARIETY OF FOODS.**
Follow the Food Guide Pyramid and CACFP recommendations to make sure that the children in your care are getting the calories they need to grow and be active.

- Follow the guidelines for numbers of servings and serving sizes for each child/age.
- Include a variety of foods from each group in your meals and snacks.
- Limit the number of fats, oils and sweets and other foods you might serve from the tip of the Pyramid.

**INVOLVE CHILDREN IN ACTIVE PLAY** to limit time spent in front of the television.

- Plan and prepare nutritious meals and snacks together. This experience can have a positive influence on a child’s health and eating habits.
- Have scavenger hunts for children to help find ingredients for recipes. Then let them help make the meal or snack.

**PLAY GAMES** that involve movement and activity.

- Plan physical activities that include all children.
- Play "marching band". Make instruments from household items like dry beans, jars, pots, lids, spoons, elastic bands, and boxes. March or wheel around your play space and make music!
- Games like "freeze tag" or "musical chairs" can be played almost anywhere, any time and really keeps you moving!
- Turn clean-up into a basketball game by choosing certain toys or a storage box as a "hoop". Make teams and play ball!
- Play “scooper catch”. Cut the bottoms off plastic gallon containers. Then tape any sharp edges and use the "catchers" to play catch.