

Childhood obesity and physical inactivity threat in Africa: strategies for a healthy future

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Abstract: Childhood obesity continues to be a serious public health problem across the globe. The problem is increasingly affecting both developing and developed countries alike, albeit at different rates. In Africa, the problem seems to be aggravated by the nutrition and physical activity transition currently taking place, which is leading to an increase in the use of energy-saving devices, the availability of cheap high-calorie dense foods and limited participation in physical activity at home and at school. The situation is complicated by socio-cultural beliefs in which obesity and overweight are admired traits and seen as a sign of wealth, prestige and the 'good life'. Efforts and strategies are therefore needed in order to address the child obesity problem which is starting to show among most African countries. This paper gives some possible strategies which might help in preventing the child obesity and physical inactivity threat in Africa. (Global Health Promotion, 2010; Supp (2): pp. 45–46)

Key words: Africa, child obesity, strategies

Introduction

Childhood obesity and physical inactivity is increasing in both developing and developed countries although at different rates (1). According to the report of the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), in 2004, about 10% of the young people aged 5–17 years globally were overweight; among whom 2–3% were obese (2). Further research findings show an increasing trend worldwide in the number of overweight and obese children, not only in the developed countries but also in the developing countries (3). This increase in child obesity and overweight means an increase in lifestyle-related chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, and certain forms of cancer among the affected children (4). Despite this, the understanding of the problem, especially in Africa, is hampered by lack of data as well as socio-cultural beliefs in which overweight and obesity is revered.

The World Health Organization, having recognized the important role of diet and physical activity in preventing disease, undertook to develop a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (5). In a resolution by the World Health Assembly in May 2005 (6) member states were mandated to:

- Initiate, strengthen, implement global, regional, national policies, plans, etc. to improve diets, promote physical activity that is sustainable, and comprehensively and actively engage all sectors.
- Increase awareness and understanding of the importance of diet and physical activity on health.
- Reduce risk factors through essential public action strategies, health-promoting and disease prevention measures.
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With this in mind and based on evidence and good practice, Africans need to be proactive and come up with practical strategies to address the problem of childhood obesity and overweight in Africa. The following strategies are suggested.

Strategies to promote active lifestyle among African children

1. Encouragement of physical activity as a way of life from childhood.
2. Promotion of the inclusion principle among governmental, private sectors and civil society so as to speak with one strong accord.
3. Establishment of intellectual and institutional partnerships that would help gather and disseminate data on childhood obesity and physical inactivity.
4. Collaboration with and high visibility in the mass media to enhance publicity, advocacy and awareness campaigns.
5. Having clear messages on physical activity and non-communicable diseases that are easy to understand bearing in mind the various cultural beliefs and barriers to communications.
6. Promotion of strategies that are practical and feasible to achieve optimum levels of physical activity.
7. Ensuring flexibility in adaptation of interventions to local socio-cultural realities.
8. Promotion opportunities for social interaction, enjoyment and mutual support among population segments at highest risk.
9. Provision of opportunities for young people to become physically active.

Healthy eating at school and at home strategy

1. School management should ensure that only foods and beverages that contribute to the nutritional well-being of children are served.

2. Parents and guardians should be part of a healthy eating plan for their children.
3. Schools should discourage consumption of foods rich in sugar and fat and encourage consumption of fruit and vegetables regularly for the health and wellness of the children.
4. There is need for awareness campaigns to enlighten populations on healthy eating and its benefits.
5. Schools should adopt a healthy eating policy to be observed at school and at home.

Conclusion

Childhood obesity is a reality and is already showing signs in Africa as a result of the nutrition and physical activity transition. There is need for Africa to be proactive so as to prevent this pandemic. Research and awareness campaigns are therefore recommended. These will require a comprehensive approach that brings together all players in this field.

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