



Office of the Child Advocate

3312 Northside Drive, Suite D-250
Macon, GA 31210

478-757-2661 or 1-800-254-2064
www.gachildadvocate.org



Childhood Obesity

By Tom C. Rawlings
State Child Advocate for the Protection of Children

Sixty-six million Americans are overweight or obese, putting themselves at risk for type II diabetes, heart disease, sleep apnea, and a host of other medical problems. Yep, just when you were ready to conveniently let slide your New Year's resolutions about eating healthier and exercising more, along comes the friendly folks at the Office of the Child Advocate to remind you not to let that gym membership lapse.

But while the American obesity epidemic affects us all, it is the growing problem of childhood obesity I want to highlight today. Over the past 30 years, childhood obesity rates have more than tripled. Currently, 17.1 percent of children and adolescents ages 6 to 19 are overweight, and almost 30 percent do not exercise three or more days per week. That's 9 million children whose health is at risk.

The health dangers of childhood obesity are real and are very likely to put an even greater drain on our limited healthcare dollars. According to a report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 61% of overweight five- to 10-year olds already have at least one risk factor for heart disease. A child who is overweight has a 70% chance of becoming an overweight adult. And nationally, the NCSL reports, medical bills attributable to obesity-related issues are estimated at \$75 billion each year.

State legislatures are beginning to take action with proposals to set school nutrition standards, to increase P.E. hours, and to eliminate trans fats from school cafeterias. Here in Georgia, a proposal is progressing through the General Assembly that would require all schools to take the body mass index (BMI) of students and report those figures to the State Department of Education. The bill also creates a position within the Department of Education responsible for monitoring student health and school systems' physical education programs. The "SHAPE Act," Senate Bill 506, passed the Senate 37-13 on February 29 and is now up for consideration by the House of Representatives.

If you would like to follow SB 506 as it goes through the legislative process, visit www.legis.ga.gov and select "SB" and "506" in the search box. You can also read the NCSL report on how other states are addressing childhood obesity at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/ChildhoodObesity-2006.htm>

It's a welcome sight to see our General Assembly focusing on the problem of childhood obesity, although some have criticized SB 506 as overreaching and undue burden on school systems.

I was a skinny, bird-chested kid myself, and my father made sure I stayed that way. When he'd come home from work in the afternoon and find me on the couch watching "Gilligan's Island," he'd make me get up and go outside. "Go do something constructive" was his favorite expression. He was a country doctor, and physical exercise was his solution to most childhood problems. If I was acting a bit hyper, he'd send me out to run around. If I was feeling down, he'd tell me I needed some exercise. I was never much of an athlete, but my father encouraged me to participate in athletics because, I believe, he knew physical exercise is therapeutic.

I'm fortunate to have three active boys who have plenty of room to run and play. But many children in this state live in small apartments in unsafe neighborhoods where a suggestion that the child "go out and play" is simply practical. For these children, a school P.E. class, recess or school basketball team may be their best chance to get exercise. And school may be the one place they can get a healthy meal each day. So, whether or not having schools monitor children's BMI is the right approach, we need to consider approaches that allow us to reach children and their parents where we can. Enlisting the aid of the school systems in our fight against childhood obesity is a good technique.

Of course, now that some of us are grown up and have office jobs, we don't get to run through the woods as much as we used to do. So, just in case our legislators want to start mandating similar testing for state employees, let me make one thing clear: you'll take *my* BMI when you pry it from my cold, d..... Oh, never mind. Here's the bottom line: Our country's epidemic of childhood obesity is one we must address as parents and as policymakers. The future health of our children depends on it.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at www.gachildadvocate.org