

Contents

Introduction page 2

Argument page 4

Conclusion page 9

Bibliography page 10

Introduction

Has childhood obesity in Britain been socially constructed? Increasing rates of obesity appear to be common to the process of industrialisation and have been linked with many factors, including a more sedentary lifestyle and diets high in fat and sugars and an abundance of food. (Gordon, Richard, 2000) The number of children suffering from obesity has increased dramatically since the mid 1980's in the UK. However this is not just a UK problem but also a global issue. Results in America have shown that the numbers with obesity have doubled since 1980. (Brown, Liz, 2001)

Obesity is defined as *“An abnormal accumulation of body fat usually 20% or more over an individual's ideal body weight. Obesity is associated with the increased risk of illness, disability, and death.”*(Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine online)

Although there is not one definitive method of calculating obesity, one method calculates body mass index (BMI). This is calculated by squaring height (in metres) and dividing weight (in Kg) by this figure. If the BMI is 30 or over that indicates obesity, this is true for adults. For children one way is to calculate the BMI and then use the following table to determine if the child is obese.

Age	Boys are overweight if BMI exceeds:	Girls are overweight if BMI exceeds:	Boys are obese if BMI exceeds:	Girls are obese if BMI exceeds:
5	17.4	17.1	19.3	19.2
6	17.6	17.3	19.8	19.7
7	17.9	17.8	20.6	20.5
8	18.4	18.3	21.6	21.6
9	19.1	19.1	22.8	22.8
10	19.8	19.9	24.0	24.1
11	20.6	20.7	25.1	25.4
12	21.2	21.7	26.0	26.7
13	21.9	22.6	26.8	27.8

(Adapted from Cole et al. (2000). British Medical Journal cited at

<http://www.weightconcern.com/bmi.htm>)

Why then has there been such an increase? Social factors that have changed over recent years may have had an impact especially if obesity has been socially constructed.

Some of these changes will be looked at in more detail

1. Changes in the structure of the family including the roles played by family members and the changes to children's leisure time.
2. Changes to education including new legislations.

Finally the need for change to social policies to reduce the numbers classed as obese. Who and what sort of changes can we make? An explanation into the type of policies that could be followed by parents, government, media, schools and the food industry in an attempt to reduce obesity levels.

For weight gain to occur energy intakes must be above energy expenditure.

As overweight children often become overweight or obese adults than the potential public health problem is immense. (BBC News online HEALTH 5.1.01) Obesity is associated with a great variety of health problems such as heart disease, diabetes and hypertension. This for the medical profession means that it is important that numbers suffering from obesity are known in order to plan for future problems. By medicalising obesity it becomes more recognised and the more people will be diagnosed as obese as more checks are undertaken. The medical profession is also trying to find an obesity gene which if found will give people an excuse for being obese. (Gordon, Richard, 2000) They will no longer be seen as lazy and greedy but as having a medical problem that requires a medical intervention.

Argument

Family structures have changed, so that there are now many more single parent families and in the case of dual parent families both parents often work. These changes have brought about changes in the way families prepare and consume meals. In the past often the mother stayed at home and prepared the meals that would be eaten together as family meals. Now with more mothers working, family meals are no longer common place. It is now more usual for family members to eat at differing times. Often eating fast or processed foods that are quick to prepare. However, these foods are often high in sugar and fat content, therefore increasing the energy intake. Physically active occupations such as mining have also been in decline with more sedentary occupations such as services (which are often office based) increasing. However, whilst people did more physical occupations they were able to eat larger meals, as they would burn off the excess calories at work, this is no longer the case with more sedentary occupations but people have not reduced the size of their meal.

The leisure activities of children have also changed dramatically. Children fifty years ago were able to play safely outside in the streets. Children played sports such as football in the streets with no worries as there was very little traffic around. They were encouraged by mothers to play outside so that they were not under their mother's feet. Nowadays children cannot play in the street, as there is too much traffic for it to be safe. Many parents argue that streets nowadays are unsafe due to levels of crime and traffic. (Staver, Pam, 1999)

Mothers used to take young children to the parks and playground to play on climbing frames slides, swings see-saws etc. they were all kept in good condition and brightly painted to encourage children to play and it was also a social event for the mother to meet up with other mothers. The parks and playgrounds today are deserted, the rides have not been kept in good order and as parents are more busy with their lives working etc there is less time available for the social meeting. Children are not encouraged to go to parks by themselves, as there is now more of a worry that abductions will take place. "*Children are often being kept indoors more for fear of what might happen to them unsupervised out of doors*" (Wyse and Hawtin 2000 p51) Children are no longer given the freedom to play outside alone, there is always the fear of the stranger danger and parents are now more likely to protect by not allowing the children out and wrapping the child in cotton wool. There is a further growing problem with parks and playgrounds as they are now often used as the meeting place for groups of youths. There is the

increasing problem of drink and drugs etc and parents of young children often now feel intimidated if they try to go to these places.

Children of today have changed their leisure pursuits with the growth of technology.

Television and computers are now commonplace in most homes. It has been shown that children now watch double the amount of time watching television as in the 1960's.

(<http://www.weightconcern.com/bmi.htm>) Many even have remote controls to change channels to avoid the physical exertion of getting up to change the channel. Television viewing is an activity that includes the two major lifestyle factors that can cause obesity sedentariness and snacking often on junk food. Inactivity has been found to be the main factor as in the 1980's in England obesity doubled yet during this period daily energy intake and fat consumption was actually reduced. (Gordon, Richard, 2000).

Watching the television is also a time when industries use advertising to market their produce. Advertisers have been criticised for advertising sweets and snack foods especially at times when children are likely to be watching. (Gunter, Barrie, 1998). Children are very easily influenced by the magic of adverts and put pressure on their parents to buy the products.

Also there have been several changes to the laws concerning education that may have had an affect on the levels of obesity. Free education was available to elementary children from 1891. As was found at the time of the Boer War when many conscripts were found to be too malnourished and physically unfit to fight in the war (Fraser, Derek, 1984), it soon became apparent that children were not able to be educated properly if they were in poor health. This was especially true for the lower class where many children were starving. The government therefore introduced legislation in 1906 to authorise the LEAs to spend public money on meals for undernourished children. Following the Beveridge Report, which was seen as a cradle to grave provision came the main Education Act in 1944. In this it gave free compulsory education from the age of five to fifteen. Services for free milk and medical and dental treatment were provided and school meals were to be provided for all children who wanted them. This was as a result of the deficiency in education that had been revealed by the evacuation of children in cities during the war. (Fraser, Derek, 1984) These services were later reduced and in 1980 and 1986 the obligation to provide free school milk and to provide school meals was removed. Nowadays there is no obligation to supply free school milk or meals to any child. (Mackinnon, Donald, 1995). These changes have obviously had impact on what was eaten at school. School meals had to have at least minimal nutritional value. Once the provision of the school meal was no longer a legal requirement children have had to bring packed

lunches. These packed lunches do not have to meet with minimum nutritional standards and the choice is therefore left to the child and parent as to what is eaten. Many schools that do still provide lunches do so on a cafeteria basis and sell the food that children like to buy which is more often chips and burgers. Vending machines offering chocolate, crisps and soft drinks are also used within schools. Children who snack rather than eat proper meals prefer these. They also provide revenue for the schools as the 1988 Education Act took financial management away from the LEA's and onto the individual schools.

Physical exercise was initially used to help improve the children's health. It was also thought that fresh air and exercise helped promote increased alertness and concentration. Therefore if the child were able to concentrate more then they would learn more at school in the other subjects. Physical education was used to promote well being and was seen as a core subject. Changes in legislation in 1988 meant that a National Curriculum was implemented and in 1992 inspections by OFSTED were introduced. (Mackinnon, Donald, 1995)

These changes meant physical education became a foundation subject rather than a core subject. The emphasis of education was returned to academic subjects such as Maths, English and Science. Less time was therefore allocated to physical education, as it was no longer a core subject. The effect of OFSTED inspections and the introduction of SSATS as a way of testing and assessing performances within schools has given an emphasis on performance and league tables and schools were therefore more likely to spend their time on the main subjects being tested, rather than any others. Lunch times were reduced to give more time for teaching the core subjects. This also had the effect of reducing playtime, which is another chance of burning up excess energy. (Mayall, Berry, 1996) In the last five years primary schools in England have halved the amount of time allocated to physical exercise. Now almost a third of all children aged two to seven are not meeting minimum levels of activity. (BBC News online HEALTH 4.6.2000) Unless activity is increased obesity is likely to become an ever-growing problem

Thatcher in the 80's encouraged free markets and this included education. Therefore during the 1980's and 90's LEA's and many schools were encouraged to sell playing fields for commercial development in order to raise income for the school this was especially true of the poorer schools and LEA's. Children were being deprived of space to play outdoors. Another reason for the reduction in physical activity within schools. Ministers have recently however, implemented restrictions using legislation to avoid the selling off of more playing fields, in an effort to reverse the reduction of physical activity. (BBC News online EDUCATION 6.6.1999)

Children today are more likely to travel to school by car as opposed to walking or cycling. In the last twenty years the number using cars has doubled. This is partly due to the fact that the number of people who have cars has increased. Also parents are also dropping children off at school in cars on their way to work. They no longer have the time to walk, another reduction in the total amount of physical activity undertaken by children.

Finally what can be done to help alleviate the problem? Many different groups from government to parents and advertising could take action. The government could impose taxes on foods with high sugar and fat contents and subsidise more healthy options such as fruit, vegetable and low fat, low sugar products. They could insist on advertising healthier foods during children television viewing. Children are influenced by the advertisements that they regularly see and if more healthy food were advertised hopefully the children would respond by eating healthier. The policy for selling school playing fields could be changed so that playing fields were kept and that funding was available to ensure that they are well maintained to encourage children to play more physical activities.

The schools themselves could help by spending time within the curriculum promoting healthy eating and re-enforcing this with healthy school meals with no unhealthy options being made available and changing the snacks in vending machines to healthy snacks only. Breakfast clubs using healthy foods can help working families as the child is then both safely at school and also receiving a healthy breakfast, which helps prepare the child for the day, and improves their concentration levels. The time given to physical education could be increased, as the main problem is reduced levels of activity. The schools would then have introduced ways of increasing activity levels and by dietary changes the intake levels would have reduced therefore weight would hopefully be reduced.

The media itself could restrict advertising unhealthy foods and using TV personalities and sports stars to convey health messages. Promoting a sense of healthier diets and lifestyles as the ideal for people to aspire to would encourage children to follow.

The food industry could respond by reducing portion sizes, therefore reducing energy intakes. The advertising of healthy foods promoted as appealing using recognised role models. As all children like to copy their idols.

Finally parents could be encouraged to use physical exercise as a family activity to be enjoyed together. A return to home cooking and family meals may help reduce the amount of snacking, rather than the easy fast food option. Walk to school weeks should be encouraged; any introduction to physical activity is help. (www.aso.org.uk)

Conclusion

Society and modernisation has been seen as a cause of obesity. Our ancestors ate high calorie foods and fats in order to manage in times when food was scarce, this was a necessity. Therefore evolutionarily we had been encouraged to eat fats in order to survive. Nowadays we do not have the scarcity of food and in the UK food is available all year round. The environment has changed dramatically only in the last hundred years yet evolution takes millions of years. It will therefore be a very long time before our evolutionary genes have caught up with today's environment. Our genes are still programmed to the ancient environment and the need to eat fats etc. (Brownell, Kelly, 1998)

It has been shown that reduced activity that has been a major consequence of modernisation by the introduction of labour saving devices and the automation of labour has been an important cause of obesity. The basic equation that governs weight changes i.e. the difference between the amounts of energy consumed and the energy used, is fundamental. Today's more sedentary society has to re-adjust the equation if it is to reduce the numbers suffering from obesity. (Gordon, Richard, 2000)

Some of the policies mentioned as a method to combat obesity are already being used and are raising the awareness of the problem. Social policies by the government are required. However, some policies that have been introduced for the good such as the laissez-faire and encouraging competition as a way to improve things have also had a disastrous effect on other issues.

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