



## *We Can!* Parent Tips: Healthy Families, Healthy Weight

There is probably nothing more important to you than your children. Taking them for regular check-ups by a health care provider is one of the important ways you help protect their health. Encouraging them to eat a healthy diet and get plenty of physical activity is also very important. More and more children in the United States weigh more than they should, and being overweight or obese (very overweight) can not only hurt a child's self-esteem but also cause serious long-term health problems. Making sure that your family eats right and gets enough physical activity is not always easy, but there are resources available to help you.

**We Can!** is a national education program of the National Institutes of Health to help parents, families, and communities raise children with healthy weights. Today's lifestyles can often make it difficult for parents to keep their families at a healthy weight. And, since children are growing, it is often not easy to know whether your child is at a healthy weight. Exactly what a healthy weight is depends on a child's age, height, and other factors. Your health care provider will calculate your child's Body Mass Index (BMI) to help you determine if your child is at a healthy weight. The BMI can then be tracked over time to see how your child is growing. If your child's BMI is in the healthy range, maintaining energy balance will keep it there.

**Energy Balance.** Energy balance is when the amount of energy IN (in the form of calories in food or drink) is the same as the energy OUT (in activities of daily living, sports and other physical activity). Becoming overweight happens when, over time, the energy we take IN by eating is more than the energy going OUT. The unburned calories get stored as extra body weight and body fat. Your child will be in "energy balance" when energy IN and energy OUT is enough to make sure they grow as they should without gaining extra weight. Some children do not need to eat a lot of extra calories to get out of balance and add on the pounds.

In order for a child to lose extra, unhealthy weight, the energy IN must be less than the energy OUT. That means:

- Choosing foods that are nutritious and lower in calories
- Cutting back on portion size (if your family tends to over-eat)
- Increasing physical activity
- Limiting "screen time" spent watching TV and playing video games that replace physical activity.

### Examples of Reducing Energy IN and Increasing Energy OUT

Reduce Energy IN:	Increase Energy OUT:
Instead of giving your child an entire bottle of fruit juice or soda, pour a small amount (1/2 cup) into a cup	Bike to the library together.
Prepare foods by steaming, baking or broiling instead of frying.	Turn off Saturday morning cartoons and take your child roller-blading or to the zoo.
For dessert, serve fruit (GO food) instead of cake, cookies or ice cream (WHOA food). (See the resources section below for more on Go, Slow, and Whoa foods.)	Plan family outings around physical activity like trips to the park, bike rides, or community sports events in which everyone participates.



Another step for you to try with your children is to reduce the amount of television and screen time they spend to less than two hours a day. Sitting in front of the television or computer for large periods of time can often lead to increases in children's weight. Substituting more active play for TV time can help children maintain a healthy weight.

**Resources.** If you think you and your children need help to build better eating and activity habits, We Can! has a number of resources and useful materials to offer. They are available on the **We Can!** Web site at <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov>

**We Can! Families Finding the Balance: Parent's Handbook.** The handbook talks about energy balance and how to choose foods in terms of Go, Slow and Whoa foods. GO foods are nutritious and low in fat and added sugar and can be eaten anytime. SLOW and WHOA foods are higher in fat, added sugar and calories and should be eaten less often. The Handbook offers suggestions for increasing physical activity and information on how many calories different activities burn (Energy OUT). You can order a free copy of the handbook by calling toll free at 1-866-35-WECAN.

Want to know more? Go to <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov> and click on the "Learn It" or "Live It" links to get started! Other resources include a tip sheet on taking simple steps to improve nutrition and increase physical activity, BMI calculator, tips on cooking and eating healthy meals, fact sheets and worksheets to keep you on track and record your progress. If you don't have a computer at home, visit your local library or ask your child's school librarian or computer teacher for help in downloading these materials.

**Community resources.** If you would like to talk to other parents about helping your family stay at a healthy weight, **We Can!** has programs for parents and for youth available in a number of communities around the country. These programs offer a range of fun and entertaining activities for children and families. Your health care provider may have information on activities in your community. Or, check the **We Can!** Web site to find out if there's a **We Can!** community site program near you.

If there's not a program in your area, contact your local YMCA, church, parks and recreation department or school PTA and encourage these organizations to start one. The **We Can!** Web site includes a "Get Involved" page with tips on how organizations can get started.

Changing eating and activity habits takes time. Start with small easy steps like cutting out after-dinner snacks or adding an after-dinner walk instead of watching TV. Try to get your children involved in choosing a new healthy step to take each day. Making it a group effort will make it easier. And the payoff will be better health for the whole family and the satisfaction of having worked together to make it happen.

