



# You Have A Ton of Power

Children and Teens Can Spread The Word For Healthy Nutrition and Physical Activity

## Super-Sized Society

Today, more children and teens than ever before are overweight or obese – nearly three times as many as 20 years. What has caused such a dramatic increase? Experts say there is no *one* reason, but rather, a combination of factors:

- Drive-through restaurants serving high-fat foods on every corner
- “Super-sized” portions are double the size of meals from the 1980s
- Sugary and high-caloric packaged foods and drinks are inexpensive and readily available in stores
- Video games win over playing outside
- Few places in our communities to walk or ride a bike
- We spend hours a day on the computer and watching television
- Schools have limited physical education and activities

## It All Adds Up

These factors add up to the first generation of young people that experts believe may have a shorter lifespan than their parents. That’s because obese and overweight children suffer from high-risk diseases such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure, which are dangerous risk factors for heart disease. However, young people all over the country are learning about this issue and becoming “advocates” – speaking to friends and family, working with schools and community organizations, even presenting to policymakers – all in an effort to bring about healthy change. You can become an advocate, too!

## Just the Facts

- Approximately 30 percent of children are overweight; more than 15 percent are classified as obese. *This number has tripled in the last 20 years.*
- Excess weight in children and adolescents is generally caused by a lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating patterns or a combination of the two. Genetics also play an important role in determining a child's weight.
- Overweight *adolescents* have a 70 percent chance of becoming overweight or obese *adults*.
- Children who are overweight are teased and discriminated against by their classmates. This leads to hurt feelings, low self-esteem and depression.
- Overweight and obesity are associated with heart disease, certain types of cancer, diabetes, stroke, arthritis, breathing problems, psychological disorders such as depression, and increased risk of death.



## Play Hard, Eat Well, Get Off The Couch

How do you live a healthy lifestyle and encourage your friends, family and classmates to do the same? Start with just three easy steps:

1. **Increase Physical Activity.** Strive to get 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Run, scooter, dance, garden, swim, play sports, do gymnastics or martial arts, ride a bike, walk your dog – there are so many choices you'll never get bored!
2. **Eat Healthfully.** Follow the guidelines of the healthy nutrition pyramid ([mypyramid.org](http://mypyramid.org)). Several tips from the website include:
  - When you choose bread and cereals, make half of them whole grain.
  - Eat a variety of vegetables and fruit.
  - Include fat-free or low-fat milk with every meal.
  - Go lean with meats, and choose fish and chicken often.
3. **Reduce Screen Time.** Watch no more than two hours of television per day. The American Pediatric Association recommends that parents also limit the amount of time children spend playing video games and using the computer.

## What You Can Do

Kids have more power than they may think. All over the country, children and teens are making a difference in the fight against youth obesity in schools, their communities and at home.

## Get Personal

You can make a difference on a **personal level** with your family, friends and classmates simply by setting an example and talking about your healthy lifestyle. Be physically active, and invite your family or friends to join you for a walk, roller-skating, a game of soccer, or any number of activities. Offer to cook your family's dinner one night a week, and prepare foods based on the healthy nutrition pyramid. When you bring your lunch to school or choose a school lunch, be sure to include healthy choices such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Discuss with your family the tips you've learned about healthy nutrition and physical activity. Many parents learn important information from their children – just consider how children have significantly influenced their parents to recycle and conserve energy.

## Do Your Schoolwork

You can also bring your ideas, activities and goals to the organizations you belong to. Youth groups, school clubs, sports teams – these are all excellent places to help your friends and classmates learn important skills for a healthy lifestyle.

- Hold a "viewing party" with your group and play the video, *The Biggest Generation* from the website ([www.connectwithkids/yeah](http://www.connectwithkids/yeah)).
- Organize a fun run for your youth group
- Band together with other students to ensure that your school offers healthy choices in its cafeteria and vending machines. Students have held activities to increase awareness and make a difference, such as "a healthy bake sale." Hundreds of schools across the country have made nutritional improvements due to the efforts of students just like you.

For more ideas about how you can make a difference in your school, visit the National Education Association at [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org) and Indiana Action for Healthy Schools at [www.nifs.org/afhk/ForKids.htm](http://www.nifs.org/afhk/ForKids.htm).



## Follow Their Lead

You'll find there are as many great ideas out there as there are kids who want to make a difference. For instance, at a middle school in California, students can become "peer health educators" and talk to their classmates about healthy eating – but in a "cool" way. In an elementary school in Pennsylvania, teachers and students have started "Walking Wednesdays," where every Wednesday morning you'll see hundreds of kids and adults walking to school. In fact, many schools report that healthier nutrition has improved students' academic success as well as student behavior.

## What's Up In Your World?

Have you ever heard a rule and thought to yourself, "I wish I could change that?" A rule is very similar to a policy – like a dress code at your school or a no-smoking policy in an office. Well, kids all over the world have used their creativity and skills to make big changes in health policies at the community, state, county and city levels. For example, a 16-year-old from Kansas successfully lobbied for tougher laws that restrict youth access to tobacco products in stores. Other students have organized state rallies and testified in front of policymakers. For more ideas about how you can make a difference and become an advocate for healthy nutrition and physical fitness, visit [www.tobaccofreekids.org](http://www.tobaccofreekids.org). To learn how policies are made and how kids are influencing the process, go to California Project Lean at [www.caprojectlean.org](http://www.caprojectlean.org) – click on "Teens Act Out."

## At Your Fingertips

There are plenty of resources to help kids take action in their schools and communities. You can contact your local hospitals, health organizations and even your family physician's office. Also:

- State Public Health Department
- School PTA/PTO organization
- School health counselors
- Faith-based organizations
- Local community organizations (i.e. Boys and Girls Club)

You can also search the Internet for "kids making a healthy difference" and you will find many organizations, success stories and resources to help you become a youth advocate for healthy nutrition and physical fitness. Several helpful websites include:

- Florida Public Health ([www.fphf.org/id3.html](http://www.fphf.org/id3.html))
- Florida Department of Health and its Youth Empowered Ambassadors for Health – **YEAH!** ([www.doh.state.fl.us/family/YEAH/](http://www.doh.state.fl.us/family/YEAH/))
- Connect with Kids and the YEAH site ([www.connectwithkids/yeah](http://www.connectwithkids/yeah))
- [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)
- [www.tobaccofreekids.org](http://www.tobaccofreekids.org)
- California Project Lean ([www.caprojectlean.org](http://www.caprojectlean.org))
- National Education Association ([www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org))
- National Institute for Fitness and Sport ([www.nifs.org/afhk/ForKids.htm](http://www.nifs.org/afhk/ForKids.htm))
- [www.americaonthemove.org](http://www.americaonthemove.org)

You have the power to make change. So grab your friends and family, classmates, and leaders – and GO!

