

# ‘Changing the way we live’

## Professor weighs in on childhood obesity

**F**irst Lady Michelle Obama recently unveiled an anti-childhood obesity campaign she is leading. Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in America have tripled; nearly a third of children in America are now overweight or obese. Jessica Hoffman, an associate professor in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences who specializes in school-based prevention of childhood obesity, discusses this urgent health issue and explains what it will take to stop the cycle.



Professor Jessica Hoffman believes in a comprehensive approach for the prevention of childhood obesity.

LAUREN MCFALLS

**Do you think that the First Lady’s initiative has the potential to make an impact?**

It’s terrific that Mrs. Obama has decided to bring attention to this very important issue that affects so many children and adolescents in this country. Given her position and her visibility, her ambitious campaign does have the potential to make a significant impact. However, it is important to remember that the obesity epidemic is complex. Mrs. Obama recognizes that this issue will take time to address, will require the allocation of significant resources and the participation of all segments of society — individuals, communities, government and business — working together.

### q&a

**The initiative focuses on four areas — healthy lunches, physical exercise, access to affordable healthy food options and a marketing campaign to publicize it all. Is there anything missing?**

These four areas are all very important to address as part of a comprehensive obesity prevention strategy. Children eat many meals and snacks in schools, so having healthful, good tasting food that they want to eat is important for physical health and optimal learning. Likewise, making healthy, good-tasting foods the easy option because they’re affordable

and accessible will make it easier for families to eat better. This is difficult because healthy foods tend to be more expensive, time-consuming to prepare and not readily available in many communities, so the food industry needs to play a role.

However, healthy eating is only part of the equation. Focusing attention on promoting physical education and recess for all kids in school is also very important. And when kids watch television, they are bombarded with advertisements for junk food.

Clearly, a serious comprehensive approach to obesity prevention needs to include efforts to curb children’s exposure to these types of ads.

**What are the largest factors contributing to childhood obesity?**

Obesity rates have skyrocketed over the past three decades, meaning the largest contributors to the problem are rooted in environmental factors. Eating too many calories is a major contributor. A lot of these calories come from drinking large quantities of sugar-sweetened beverages and eating large food portions that contain a lot of fat and sugar. High-calorie foods are cheap, readily available and tasty, making them very difficult to resist. Our environment is also engineered for us to get very little physical activity, which is also a large

contributor to the problem.

**Northeastern’s involvement in Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures — the initiative aimed at curbing childhood obesity in several Boston neighborhoods — was one of the first programs of its kind in the nation. What are the preliminary findings from the program?**

Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures aims to educate preschool caregivers and parents about the importance of healthy eating and physical activity, and provide young children with new opportunities to be active.

Our initial data shows that all of the program components were implemented successfully, and that caregivers who participated in nutrition education workshops were more committed to making behavioral changes related to healthy eating and physical activity for their families. Finally, we showed that children who participated in the Open Gym program were very physically active when they attended.

**Your research focuses on preventing childhood obesity through school programs. What has been the most successful tactic in your research thus far?**

It can be difficult to implement childhood obesity prevention programming in schools because of all the competing educational priorities. I’ve found that it

is critical to design programs that are easy and fun to implement, are time efficient and are connected to other learning goals. One strategy that I use is having many people in the school serve as program implementers so that no one person is overburdened, and children hear the message from multiple sources.

**Cities such as Boston, New York and Chicago have launched anti-obesity campaigns over the years, yet the obesity rates in both children and adults continue to rise. What will it take to make a lasting change?**

It will probably take sustained efforts over several generations to make a lasting change because it involves changing the way we live.

With the help of federal stimulus funds and Mrs. Obama’s new campaign, more communities will be launching anti-obesity initiatives in the near future. These efforts will not only benefit the communities where they are implemented, but they will also help us identify what approaches work best in addressing obesity prevention.

In order to make lasting changes, all segments of society need to be involved in this movement, and need to invest over the long term. The result will be healthier children, lower health care costs and a more productive society.