



Soft Drinks in Schools

Background

The "obesity epidemic" has been reported in the media and is documented by scientific studies. Overweight is now the most common medical condition in childhood. The prevalence has doubled in the last 20 years. In Hawaii, the incidence of obesity is higher than the national average of approximately 15%. In the 6 to 9-year age group the percentage of overweight children of Hawaiian ancestry is 26.5% and of non-Hawaiian ancestry, 20.7%. Young adults are seeing the consequences of obesity with an increased incidence of type-2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and others.

In our country, our children receive a diet, which is excessively high in added (discretionary) fat and sugar. Sweetened drinks are the main source of added sugar in children's diets. A 12 oz. serving of a sweetened soft drink contains the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of sugar. As children switch from milk consumption to soft drinks, their intake of calcium decreases and their bone mass may be calcium depleted in later years.

The Problem

The problem for the children is that sweetened soft drinks are easily available to them from the vending machines in the schools. Schools inadvertently promote soft drink sales from vending machines at the same time they offer nutritious meals in the school lunch programs. The schools get income from the sale of soft drinks but at the expense of putting the future health of the students at risk.

Pediatricians' Perspective

To the pediatrician this is a problem in changing behavior to obtain a healthier lifestyle. This can be done by creating an environment which is conducive to the lifestyle we are encouraging. In the home we don't order the children to eat this or that. We decide what constitutes a nutritious diet and put that on the table. The child's appetite takes over from there. In the same way we can make a nutritious environment available to children in the schools. If we are to have vending machines, they should contain nutritious drinks. They should not contain drinks that lead to obesity and associated health problems.

Advocacy

1. Work to eliminate sweetened drinks from the schools and substitute more nutritious drinks.
2. Establish a school nutrition advisory council comprising parents, school officials and health professionals.
3. Public review of vended food or soft drink contracts.
4. Modify existing soft drink contracts so that over-consumption by students is limited.

Reference for further details: American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement:

On the AAP website, www.aap.org under Policy Statements and published in Pediatrics, Vol. 113 Jan. 2004 pp152-154