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SHOHRE ZAHEDI FIGHTS OBESITY BY HELPING ONE CHILD AT A TIME

By Nora Todor Stoytcheva



"Familia", painting by Fernando Botero.
Oil on canvas, 241 x 195 centimeters - 1989.

We may be the first generation in history to outlive our children, because of their obesity and illnesses related to it -- heart disease, diabetes, cancer -- say experts of the International Obesity Task Force. By 2010, almost 287 million kids worldwide will be obese, with the number rising to 700 million by 2015, according to the group.

Closer to home, some 25.8 percent of children in San Diego County are overweight – that is one in four children, according to California Center for Public Advocacy

Carmel Valley resident Shohre Zahedi is a member of the board of directors for the North County Health Services, a nutritionist and former food industry insider. She worked on product development, quality control and microbiology for the likes of Nestle Research Center, Borden Food Service and Dole Foods, and knows what she is talking about regarding the healthy foods.

Zahedi is certified by the American Diabetic Association as a weight management specialist, with her own company – Hygia Weight Loss and Nutrition.

Zahedi volunteers her time, a lot of it, and the quality of her expertise to help obese and overweight children. She spends several hours every week giving nutritional consultations at Encinitas Women's and Children's Health Center, part of the North County Health Services.

"Even though it has the stigma of a community clinic, it provides full scoop of care, from OB care to well-child maintenance and is as a medical home to families," said Nancy Aldana, the pediatrician who refers overweight and obese kids to Zahedi.

Many of these kids are from so-called underserved populations, from families which prefer to buy processed food in bulk instead of fresh fruits and vegetables. They have less access to organized activities, such as soccer or baseball practice, and often live in small cramped apartments, where the best thing to do is to put children in front of the TV. Also, especially for smaller kids, it is considered healthy if the children are chubby and their parents and grandparents do not want to hear of sending them to nutritionist.

"There is nothing bad with a child who is breast-fed to be a bit chubbier," Adana said. "But it is not the case with the child that has the same weight and height, but is fed on formula. I take into view many different factors before I refer them to Shohre."

Zahedi is trying to fight the obesity problem not by preaching, but through solid education. She speaks Spanish and French, besides her native Farsi, and the direct communication at their level of understanding is very important for the Latino families Zahedi serves. She does not speak of calories to them, but rather says: "This is good for your teeth and your bones. If you want to grow up to be as tall as your dad, you have to drink milk." She is telling them to buy fruits and vegetables which are in season, and thus on sale, and is convincing them that eating healthy may be even cheaper than eating fast foods.

Once the people start listening to her recommendations, not only does the child lose weight, but the changes in the diet touch the habits of the adults around that child, too.

Take, for example, the family of 15-year-old Alessandro. He was obese when he met Zahedi, and has lost 20 pounds since he has been seeing her. "I was a chubby boy and would get tired very quickly," he said.

His mom, with her son translating, said, "Let me tell you about my experience. Before I was a fat woman (for her height), weighing 172 pounds.

Now, I weigh 165 pounds and I am very grateful to have lost weight thanks to the motivation from my nutritionist. I feel really good, with desire to keep moving forward and eating healthy. My diet includes salads with chicken, fish and a lot of vegetables, fruit, water, milk. They are good for your health and in small portions it is good to eat them.

"This has been a great effort to lose weight," She continued. "I feel lighter while doing my work and daily activities. It is easier in every way. To be fat will make you sick and you have no desire to do anything. Everything is hard and you feel lazy. Now everything is very different. That is why I would say to everyone who wants to lose weight that it is never too late. I would encourage you and my doctor is waiting to help motivate you."

The mother said it has been even cheaper to eat healthy, and the family found a way to enjoy physical activity. They run around the church yard in their neighborhood every night for one hour, she said.

Zahedi asks every one of her patients to write down on a sheet of paper what they, or their children, have eaten for the week. She analyzes it and makes suggestions for gradual change in the diet, and the physical activity. How about limiting the TV to one hour a day, she might suggest. Or playing on the playground more often? Giving books as a reward instead of candy?

In the course of our conversations I asked Zahedi for suggestions to control childhood obesity. These included:

What is the right way to put a child on more sensible diet, without making him or her feel put down?

- Consumption of a varied diet in moderation, emphasizing nutrient dense food choices.
- Inspiring parents and children to make healthy eating and exercise a regular part of their lives. Complying with the child's food preferences and allowing the child to manage his own food intake. Avoiding overly restrictive behaviors and responding to the child's internal cues of hunger and fullness.
- Choosing whole foods rather than processed foods.
- Encouraging consumption of recommended quantities of fruits and vegetables. For children two-to-nine years of age, 63 percent are not consuming the recommended number of servings of fruits and 78 percent are not consuming the recommended number of servings for vegetables.
- Limiting consumption of sugar sweetened beverages. In 1945, Americans drank four times more milk than soft drinks, whereas in 1997, they drank nearly 2.5 times more soft drinks than milk. During this same time period, carbonated soft drink consumption increased 41 percent.
- Eating breakfast daily. Some studies have shown a significant positive relationship between eating breakfast and school performance.
- Limiting eating out at restaurants, especially fast food restaurants.

What the parents should do and say:

Parents have a major impact on their children's eating and physical activity.

- They need to teach their kids healthy eating habits early on. Change becomes more difficult as they age.
- Offer nutritious foods at home.
- Make meal times family time and fun. Children whose families eat together have better quality diet. They have higher intakes of fruits and vegetables, fiber, calcium, iron, vitamins and lower intakes of saturated and trans fatty acids.
- Don't force food on children. Studies have shown that sometimes the child needs to be exposed to a new food several times before she, or he, decides to try it and see if they like it.
- Get the children involved with the shopping and cooking.
- Keep the portion sizes small. They can always ask for more. Research has shown that children 3-to-5 years of age consumed 25 percent more of an entree and 15 percent more of their food at lunch when presented with portions that were double an age appropriate standard size.
- Read ingredient lists, because sometimes the messages on the front of the package are misleading. On the ingredient list, what is listed first predominates by weight and the items are in descending order by weight. For example, if you see sugar and corn syrup as the first few items, you know that this product is mostly sugar and should be avoided.
- Limit fast food. In 1997, nearly half of away from home meals were fast food.

Children consuming fast food had higher intakes of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium and lower intakes of fiber, calcium and iron than those who did not.

- Spend time on the weekend planning the week's menu.
- Use positive reinforcement. Reward good eating and physical activity behaviors with non food items

- Limit screen time -- TV, video games, computer, handheld games -- to no more than 1- 2 hours a day and no television in the room where the child sleeps. A quarter of U.S. children watch four, or more, hours of television each day and hours of television watched is positively associated with increased body mass index.

- Children need to be active for one hour everyday.