



On July 11, **Felicity McRobb and Dennis Bishop** hosted 14 people at their home for Sunday brunch to discuss ways to reduce obesity. **Jean Rystrom**, Regional Practice Director for Pediatrics with Kaiser Permanente and **Mel Rader**, Co-director of Upstream Public Health moderated discussions on how we all can promote wellness in our community, beginning with our children.

Obesity rates in the United States have quadrupled since the 1970's, reaching epidemic proportions. The focus of this discussion addressed these premises:

- Our man-made environment emphasizes and supports a form of consumerism of which obesity is an outcome.
- Food is manipulated to pique and gratify our natural desires for fat, sugar and salt - ultimately increasing our caloric consumption.
- Innumerable inventions, starting with the wheel, are designed to make our lives easier - ultimately reducing our caloric expenditures.
- Our entertainments are increasingly tied to both increased caloric consumption and decreased physical activity, potentially decreasing deep social engagement and the practice of sustained attention.

Food arrives in our stores and on our plates far from its original source, so processed that it isn't basic food. Much of our economy is based on food processing, which strips nutrients from raw foods, "prepares" it for consumption using unnecessary oils and starches, creating an unhealthy, highly caloric product.

Screen entertainment time has increased. The actors on screen do not have authentic eating and exercise routines. Increased screen time correlates with sleep problems, lower academic performance, a decrease in social engagements and attention problems. There are many misconceptions about infants and toddlers and TV. Tapes and DVDs marketed to increase baby's intelligence are not proven to have any benefit for the baby, and are in fact shown to hinder language development. Furthermore, exposure to two or more hours of "television" (including videos) at age 36 months increases risk for being overweight. Pediatricians are advised to talk to their parents who have kids under one year of age about the effects of screen time.

The group discussed whether prevention activities such as prenatal education, school fitness, etc. can overcome mass marketing. How could corporations be enrolled in prevention? What if food companies were enlisted as partners vs. enemies? Who are the natural partners who want to decrease obesity – airlines? Others?

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One participant mentioned that Boy Scout leaders have a maximum weight limit to be able to accompany troops on hikes – this is highly motivating for fathers who want to spend time with their children.

Does a better bottom line for a food company mean more obesity in society? Certainly, there is an incentive to sell more quantities of food to make more profit, but there is also an incentive to improve the quality of food at a cost premium. Perhaps there can be a win-win: If grocery stores sold more healthy foods, they would likely have a customer base with more longevity purchasing healthy foods, thus increasing profits over a longer period of time.

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*Research shows kids do well in school and life when they are well nourished and get activity – this is what we need to promote.*

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Obesity is multifaceted. Because it is a complex issue, it will have a complex solution. If there was a simple solution, it would have been resolved by now. We need to look at individuals, families, schools, communities, environment and the government for both causes and solutions. Change at all levels will be required.

The group explored factors contributing to obesity, such as **personal choice in an environment which promotes consumption and sedentary activity**. It is unlikely that Americans, who have gotten heavier in the past 30-40 years, simply lost their motivation and will power. We must work to support individuals as they navigate their environment. We face the challenge of frequent temptation and foods that are designed to deliver a lot of calories with very little eating effort. “It’s important to empower people that choices that are made today matter. Every day, every choice matters,” emphasized Jean Rystrom.

**Education makes a difference.** One participant, a pediatrician, noted that 17 years ago, it was a rarity to see an obese child in his practice; now, nearly a quarter of his patients are obese. While an uphill battle, counseling the family on this often emotional issue is necessary.

**Changes in family structure** has been profound and has big influences on family health. With more time working, there is less time to spend with children. Television has become an easy option to entertain kids, and the cultural of eating a family meal around the dinner table has diminished. With or without family, eating is a social act. What we choose to eat is highly influenced by what our friends and family are eating. It can be a driving force behind food habits in our families and communities. New research is showing that the most important determinant of what we eat is what our friends and family eat – making it increasingly important that we create social interactions that promote healthier eating habits.

The **design of our neighborhoods and access to public transportation** affects our health as well. Creating communities where kids can get out and play together and have a sense of safety in

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the neighborhood is paramount. People need healthy foods near their homes and ways to easily access healthy foods, such as sidewalks, bike paths, and city buses. Commuters who use public transportation get 16 minutes per day of walking during their commute compared to 1.5 minutes of walking for those who commute by car. Therefore, a commute by public transit can fulfill over half of the recommended 30 minutes of moderate exercise per day.

Broader causes of childhood obesity include **agricultural policy**, in particular, how subsidizing large grain crops influences costs of different food products and makes processed junk foods cheaper. The increasing use of nutrition labels on foods hopes to change consumer habits. **Cultural factors**, such as the importance placed on the Thanksgiving feast, portion sizes and the psychology of food, also contribute to obesity. For example, the size of plates has increased such that modern plates won't fit in older cupboards, and the size of a "normal" bagel, cookie or muffin has increased dramatically.

There is an interesting **triangulation between obesity, hunger and poverty**. In past decades, those in the lowest income brackets were often underweight for lack of nutrients. However, now increasingly those in poverty are eating more empty calories and are more likely to be obesity. It is therefore very important that we promote policies and programs that increase access to healthy foods for those in poverty, and not penalize them for eating unhealthy foods.

Does history say that things have to get really bad before they change, such as smoking? Changing smoking habits in the US was hard and took a long time – is this what will be needed for obesity? Tobacco prevention efforts utilized multiple strategies to achieve reductions in smoking including the creation of smoke-free spaces such as workplaces and restaurants, changes to the price of cigarettes through taxation, and education of the public about the dangers of smoking. A similar broad and diverse strategy to reduce obesity may be necessary.

**Policy** is an important tool to affect many small changes that can have a big cumulative impact. On the national level, officials are currently debating how much money to put into school meal programs and improve the quality of food provided in schools. Oregon is one of four states that does not provide funds for school lunch and breakfast. Next year in Oregon there will be legislation around state funding tied to providing local, farm fresh food for school meals (requesting 7 cents per breakfast and 15 cents per lunch), and funds for schools to set up gardens.

Citing Abernethy Elementary School in SE Portland as a national model for cooking school food from scratch, school gardens, and teaching kids to eat right, Mel Rader said we need to "invest in healthy eating as a core part of school curriculum." This is beginning to happen. More and more schools are planting community gardens and incorporating the garden into their classrooms and cafeterias.

We, as a community, can change behavior through policy. A community can develop an overall policy for health and wellness, create relationships with political leaders, and have intellectual debates on topics that matter. Even a small group of people can make a difference.

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There is significant momentum at the local, state and national level to address obesity. Multnomah County was recently awarded an \$8 million grant to fund dozens of organizations to reduce obesity through changes in local policies. At the state level, The Oregon Health Improvement Plan task force is coming up with broad recommendations on how to reduce obesity while saving millions of dollars in healthcare costs. At the national level Michelle Obama has identified childhood obesity as her signature issue that she seeks to address during her time as the First Lady.

**Thinking outside the box** with help from the Berkeley Media Studies Group and others:

- limiting the number and location of fast food buildings, such as a restricted zone near schools
- asking grocers to create a “Candy-Free Check Out Aisle” or putting candy in harder to access places like tobacco, etc.
- ask grocers to put lower nutrient items on the higher shelves or display the nutrition label facing the aisle
- establishing “unplugged” community events
- fostering school gardens to teach kids about their food
- ensuring recess and PE through schools
- regulating advertising of foods to kids
- impose standards on what foods and drinks can be sold in schools

**Recommended books and reports:**

- **Born to Buy** by Juliet Schor
- **Consuming Kids** by Susan Linn; also an excellent movie - <http://consumingkids.bravenewtheaters.com/>
- **Feed** (a futuristic novel, especially for teens) by M T Anderson
- **The End of Overeating** by Kessler
- **Mindless Eating** by Brian Wansink
- **Fighting Junk Food Marketing to Kids: a toolkit for advocates** from the Berkeley Media Studies Group
- **In Defense of Food** by Michael Pollan
- **Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds** from the Kaiser Family Foundation

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Links to information for parents and ways to help our kids address other important aspects of life:

- [Greenhour](#)
- [Turnoff Week](#)
- [Needham Unplugged](#)
- [Family Game Night](#)
- [School gardens](#)
- [Chefs in schools](#)
- [Food marketing](#)
- [Menu labeling](#)
- [Protecting recess and PE](#)
- [Media literacy training](#)
- [Regulating advertisements to kids](#)

The mission of Metropolitan Family Service is to strengthen families and individuals while enhancing their participation in community life. Organized by MFS, **A Gathering of Good (agog)** is a series of community events promoting discussion, civic engagement and social change. In addition to exploring important social issues as a community, **agog dinners & discussions** raise public awareness of MFS's effective programming for children, families, and older adults. MFS is celebrating 60 years of community service in 2010.



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