Lone Star Battleground

The fight against vaccine mandates in Texas

The Kennedy/De Niro Press Conference
Shining a light on corruption in the vaccine program

Breaking New Ground
Innovative ASD Housing
Parents of children on the autism spectrum have countless thoughts running through their minds at any given moment. They deal with the worries all parents experience, like whether a child is generally happy, sick, or safe, and also with a set of anxieties unique to their particular situation, like how to control mood swings, prevent violent outbursts, or ensure a child well past potty-training age will actually use the potty.

Few people confronted with such perpetual stress have a lot of room for other worries, like getting the entire family to sit down to a healthy home-cooked meal, or engage in some form of physical activity together.

But the consequences of not at least trying to foster positive eating habits and encourage exercise are all too real. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than one-third of adults in this country and about 17 percent of children are obese. And while a recent figure showed that the level of obesity has dropped significantly for kids ages 2-5, other research casts a much more ominous shadow for kids with autism.

ONE THING LED TO ANOTHER

A 2014 CDC report found that more than 30 percent of children on the autism spectrum are either overweight or obese. What’s more, this and other studies have indicated that obese children with autism are more likely to experience other health issues, such as asthma, migraine headaches, anxiety, depression and sleep problems.

As any parent of a child with autism will attest, it is often tricky business getting these kids to eat anything—let alone anything healthy—and to engage in physical activity. That’s a challenging combination for anyone—on the spectrum or not, child or not.

Not surprisingly, obesity has been linked with a slew of medical conditions: coronary heart disease; type 2 diabetes; cancers; liver and gall bladder disease; sleep apnea and other respiratory problems; bone and joint degeneration; reproductive problems; and mental health disorders. Anyone’s
risk of health problems increases with age. Life is hard enough for children with autism. Living with disease as they get older will only make it harder, for them and their caretakers.

NEVER TOO LATE
The dangers of obesity, especially sustained obesity, are too great to ignore. Luckily, it’s never too late to make positive changes: research has shown that even people in their 70s who start an exercise program for the first time can reap its rewards. As parents, we try our best every single day, and sometimes we fail. Children on the autism spectrum are a particularly stubborn bunch, refusing to eat certain foods or partake in certain activities no matter what. But we owe it to them, if not to ourselves, to at least try.

When it comes to food and eating, we are creatures of habit, sometimes opting to eat a particular food not because it tastes better or is healthier, but because it is familiar. Kids with autism thrive on routine and comfort, so while they may resist a new, unfamiliar food at first, a little persistence could go a long way toward adopting healthier habits.

As with most things, creativity is key. Few people want to eat a floret of raw broccoli; it can be tough, dry, and gag-inducing for even the most seasoned vegetable aficionado. But broccoli is easily transformed in the oven with some olive oil, salt and pepper, and then pureed with vegetable stock to make a soup. The same goes for cauliflower, carrots, and just about any vegetable you can easily roast or sauté.

If your child is finicky about food textures and prefers a crunchy substance to a creamy one, try roasting chickpeas until they’re nice and brown; the sensation of biting into one is similar to that of popcorn. Chickpeas are rich in insoluble fiber, which aids in digestion. As the parent of any child with autism knows all too well, solving a digestive problem can be the first step to solving a behavioral problem.

SMARTER CHOICES = BETTER HEALTH
When it comes to making smart food choices, knowing the difference between good and bad is half the battle. Take sugar, for instance. The body recognizes and digests the sugar found naturally in fruit more easily than it does the sugar added to processed foods.

Sugar hides, too, in seemingly innocuous places like ketchup and milk. Aside from being linked to type 2 diabetes and obesity, added sugar has been implicated as a major contributing factor to heart disease. The consequences of poor eating habits in childhood persist into adulthood, and taking one step is all that’s needed to get on a healthier path.

Beyond added sugar, other foods and ingredients to avoid (especially in processed products) include:

- Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)
- Pesticide-laden, non-organic fruits and vegetables
- High-fructose corn syrup, a processed sweetener that has been found to contain mercury
- Canned goods, most of which contain the toxin bisphenol-A (BPA) in the lining
- Dairy and animal products that may contain antibiotics or synthetic hormones
Focus on including as much fresh, organic, non-GMO fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, and dairy as possible into your family’s diet. Studies have shown organic foods actually ARE more nutritious than their conventionally grown counterparts.

How you make your food matters too. Try to avoid microwaving—it not only exposes you and your family to radiation, but changes the inherent composition of the food. Frying food is also risky, and has been linked to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Other information suggests the risks of obesity during pregnancy—gestational diabetes, hypertension, and cesarean delivery—may also carry over to the baby. A 2016 study showed that obese women who also have diabetes are four times as likely to have a child diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, compared to healthy weight mothers without diabetes.

One of the leading contributors to bad eating habits is stress, and few people are more stressed out than parents of children on the spectrum. Research has shown that stress causes people to seek the foods they eat out of habit, regardless of how healthy those foods are (or aren’t). If your go-to snack is raw almonds or carrot sticks, you’re ahead of the game, and your kids probably are too. But turning to chemical-laden processed foods will only make things worse in the short and long-term. Children with autism usually rely on nobody more than their parents. Taking care of yourself helps you take care of them.

**FITNESS INTERVENTION**

Preventing or reversing obesity through dietary choices is just one part of the equation. The other is exercise, and its value cannot be overstated. It is understandably challenging to get kids on the autism spectrum involved in team sports with mainstream kids, or to run on a treadmill at the gym. But parents have every reason to intervene, and as early as possible: research has found that older children with autism spectrum disorders are significantly less active than their younger counterparts.

There are many ways to encourage children on the autism spectrum (or any children!) to be more active. Specifically for the autism population, the American Council on Exercise (ACE) recommends keeping a consistent daily schedule that includes meals, snacks, and physical activity breaks, and to keep this schedule posted somewhere as a visual reminder. Kids on the spectrum sometimes wander, a behavior often viewed in a negative light. But a supervised walk through a safe area—the park, a hiking trail, a mall—is an excellent way for them—and you—to blow off some steam.

ACE notes that swimming and light jogging have been shown to decrease the self-stimulating behaviors to which ASD kids are prone, and that yoga can be useful to guide children with autism through times of transition. Yoga is also a great way to stretch tight muscles, and allow for greater range of motion. Check with local gyms or the YMCA to see if any classes are geared toward people with disabilities or autism; if not, get a group of like-minded individuals together, and create one.

Aside from keeping their weight in check and providing them with a social outlet, physical activity is also an excellent way for kids on the autism spectrum to deal with aggression. Studies show that vigorous or strenuous exercise is associated with decreases in hyperactivity, aggression, self-injury, and destructiveness, according to the Autism Research Institute. There is virtually no downside to upping physical activity for kids on the spectrum, and for the adults they will become.

Obesity is a plague in this country, and it is spreading around the world. It doesn’t have to invade your home. Changing well-established habits is tricky business, but doing so will pay dividends in the long run, and may lead to improved outcomes in school and at home. Growing up isn’t easy for anyone, but removing the burden of bad health makes it just a little bit easier, and may provide ASD kids with something even more foreign than a new snack: it gives them an advantage.

**Note:** Information provided herein is not intended to treat or diagnose any health condition. As always, consult your healthcare provider with any questions or health concerns.