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Lifestyle: Its Impact on Obesity

Let's take a trip to the U.S. to a small southern Iowa, low income community, population 1200. Like most of the people in the United States, the residents of Corydon don't give much thought or consideration to their lifestyles or eating habits.

Meet Betty Smith, a single mother trying to raise a family of three on a teacher's low income of \$33,000 a year. She has two boys in high school and one girl in elementary. Between going to her boys' baseball games in the summer, football games in the fall, basketball games in the winter, track meets in the spring, her daughter's dance recitals, choir recitals, and softball games and trying to fit in her own social life, job, and fun, this mother leads a very hectic, busy, on-the-go life. Her diet is not very healthy. She does not think about healthy foods or snacks. She hardly ever cooks because she just doesn't have the time. She buys what her children want, and with two boys in her home she keeps a full refrigerator and shelves stocked with junk foods. Potato chips, candy bars, soda pop, frozen pizza, cookies, and ice cream are just a few examples of their unhealthy choices of food. Missing are 6 ounces of whole grain, 2 ½ cups of vegetables, 2 cups of fruits, 3 cups of dairy, and 5 ½ ounces of protein daily recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Pyramid.

Since this family's on-the-go lifestyle is constantly going, they hardly ever sit down as a family to enjoy the meal and each other's company. The mother doesn't spend any time in preparing the food, setting the table, or putting any extra thought into nutrition or healthy choices. A typical family meal for this family consists of frozen pizza on paper plates, pop in plastic cups, and maybe a cookie or candy bar. Their conversation consists of the program they are watching on television. They live a very fast paced life and have yet basically a very sedentary lifestyle. Almost everywhere the kids go Betty drives them. A few examples are: she drives them to school, to their friends' houses, to practices and to games. Because they live in town, they could just walk or bike and get exercise; but instead they choose to drive. The time taken to walk or bike would be time away from their TV. Like the average American kids, Betty's kids spend 4 hours a day watching TV and playing video games – a sedentary life style for sure!

In my opinion, people's lifestyles are changing for the worse. Everyone is in a hurry and they don't take the time to plan out their meals for the day. They don't realize that all the candy bars and soda add up over time. If Betty Smith and her family eat a large apple it is 80 calories, if they drink a large Mountain Dew it is 440 calories. People don't think of the long term results. They just think that they are hungry and that they can't wait for the meal or for a healthy snack so they go for a candy bar to make them feel better. But, in the long run their food choices don't make them feel better about themselves because they become fat. Their choices are not healthy – they lead to obesity and malnutrition because they are not getting the important nutrients their bodies need. More than half of American adults and one quarter of American children are considered obese or overweight. Obesity is the second highest cause of mortality rates, with smoking the number one cause.

The family environment becomes a victim to this unhealthy way of living. The family doesn't get a chance to talk to one another or spend time with each other. The family's health suffers from this lifestyle because they don't eat 3 healthy meals a day; they eat too much junk food; and because they don't exercise enough they become overweight or obese. The environment of our culture suffers also. Our culture is losing our family values and the activities that used to be so important to the family like the family garden, spending time with another, and meal time. Families today just don't take the time to eat

long relaxing meals as a family. They eat their food so hurried and then want more and end up over-eating. If they could slow down and enjoy their meal they could avoid over-eating.

Food proportions are changing. A child's soft drink was 8 ounces in the late 1950's and today it is 12 ounces and a large soda is 32 ounces. Kids are developing a taste for sugar that is going to be very hard for them to lose. They have some sugar in the morning and then they go on craving it all day. Sugar is the number one addiction today and it is a cause of obesity. Sugar drains the body of needed vitamins and minerals through the demands its digestion and detoxification make upon every organ in the body. Because these organs are needy, a cycle of cravings is begun. Instead of mothers stocking cupboards full of unhealthy food and snacks they could buy healthy snacks like fresh fruit, canned fruit, nuts, vegetables, and yogurt.

Obesity and lifestyle is affecting everyone, not just adults. Children are becoming obese. Severely obese kids (ages 6-10) are now dying from heart attacks. If the parents of these children lead unhealthy lifestyles then it will be passed down from generation to generation; therefore, we need to get more people educated about this situation. Obesity is a big problem today. What can we do to help people lose weight? We need to educate all Americans, young and old, about the need for healthy nutrition and active exercise.

It used to be families would work hard physically to grow their food in gardens, help each other prepare the meal, sit down, eat, and talk as a family. They would eat fresh fruit, vegetables, and enjoy a home cooked meal family style. There were no greasy French fries or hamburgers, or salty potato chips or soda pop.

In our foods class in my high school we were asked if we sat down and ate with our families regularly. Only 2 out of 32 kids raised their hands saying they eat regular meals with their family daily. 8 out of 32 said they ate with their family at least twice a week. I'd say the situation we are facing is getting to be a major problem. We need to be trying to help people understand why they are becoming obese and what they can do to change their health.

The situation for Betty Smith's family is getting worse because they don't realize the long term effects of their lifestyle. The kids are going to grow up with bad eating habits, and if they stay uneducated they will teach their kids the same. If we could help improve and educate people on their lifestyles and eating habits we could drastically change nutrition. People would become more aware, want to be healthier, and would realize everything they eat adds up. It would help keep our family values and our culture if we just slowed down and thought. This would benefit everyone.

What can we do to creatively educate Betty's family about meals? One day at my school all the tables were numbered, and as students and teachers were paying for their meals they took a number and then sat at that numbered table. Everyone thought it was a different, fun way to mix things up, and sometimes that's a part of being satisfied with what we eat. It is a way to make lunch time fun, relaxing, and enjoyable – because that's how the meals should be.

To become healthier I think that it is very important that parents like Betty Smith teach their children good health practices. I think parents need to become more aware of the fact that they are role models and what their child sees them eating is taken into a mental note. And if the child sees the parent eating unhealthy, then when they grow up they are likely to eat that same way, and teach their own children the same thing. We have a program in our town called the Nest (sponsored by the Iowa State Extension Service and our State-funded Empowerment Board) and it is to educate parents about health and especially about the health of their young children. The kids really like to be involved in making the food, and when they make the food they are more likely to try new things. Anything that gets kids to try

something new is good because kids don't usually want to try new things because they are afraid to. The Nest, Day Care providers, and Headstart children all are stressing the same themes: involvement of children in food preparation, sitting down together to eat their meals, trying new foods, and eating well-balanced meals in a pleasant, relaxed setting.

One of the fun things the kids in the Junior High participate in is something called "Harris and Me Day". The kids all read the book "Harris and Me" which is about the adventures of two young kids living in the old fashioned days. Once they finish reading the book, they take a field trip to one of our historical sites that is set up like it used to be with a one room school house, church, and a round barn. All the kids dress old fashioned, they make apple cider, bake a pie, and they eat fried chicken, homemade bread, mashed potatoes and gravy. This is a really good way of educating kids about how it used to be, how our culture has changed so much, and how to embrace the family meal.

The cooks at my school are discouraged because they think that the kids just won't eat what they cook. They said that the kids wouldn't try anything new. Students may not try what the school cooks are serving now, but they will try new things if it is attractively set up or is different from how they normally do things. The salad bar at our school is the same thing every day. Instead of the same thing every day, we could have the horticulture class and the foods classes grow a variety of dark, green baby lettuces, cherry tomatoes, and other types of vegetables. We could also have a variety of dressings like vinegar and olive oil, ranch, and Italian.

For a creative response to cafeteria food, Iowa State University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture has local food markets which are partnerships for "supporting farms, improving health, and building a community." They have several types of projects in Iowa. Basically Iowa farmers sell fresh produce and other foods to restaurants and institutions. On the Leopold Center website they report "Locally grown food is provided to a variety of institutions including colleges and universities, nursing homes, hospitals, corporate cafeterias, conference centers, hotels and restaurants, state government-run institutions (prisons, county cafeterias), and place of business subscription enterprises." These institutions report a growing demand for this fresh food. Why? Because it tastes better! Consumers enjoy supporting local growers. Like the Headstart children, we all like involvement with our food.

Another idea is that once a week the school could have a family style meal and the foods classes could be involved in cooking the meal. Kids would like it because they had been involved and it would be a different and fun way to try new things. People could sit together, have conversation cards, and talk about topics that they normally don't talk about with people they normally don't sit with. Kids can benefit from eating slowly because they will be able to enjoy the food more, and feel satisfied instead of craving more.

At our school we have a pop machine and a Gatorade machine. Between about every class many of the students buy pop. The student council was going to buy a juice machine and a milk machine, but instead they bought a pop machine and a Gatorade machine. That is just encouraging the kids to drink pop and it isn't improving their health any. Instead of buying the pop machine right away they should have bought the milk machine and juice machine. Kids would have made healthy choices because it would have been the only thing available to us. Some of the teachers that are against the pop machines put up signs in their classrooms that say "This is a pop free zone" and they encourage their students to drink water instead of pop. They have cups and ice cold water in their classes. That is a good way to encourage healthy habits.

Another needed improvement involves food offered at concession stands during sporting events. Every season, Betty Smith and her family regularly attend all the sporting events. This family eats the

usual hotdogs, chips, candy bars, and soda pop served at the games. We should try offering yogurt, bottled water, fresh fruit, and nuts as healthy choices.

A program that is beneficial to both adult and child is mentoring. We could teach our kids how to grow gardens and eat what they have grown. Then they would be working hard and exercising and they would be able to eat their own healthy crop.

There are a lot of different programs trying to push for better lifestyles, eating habits, and healthy food choices. My favorite organization is called Slow Food. Slow Food is a world wide program that encourages people to take time to enjoy their food. They have 83,000 members all over the world. It is a non profit organization that funds different projects to help their cause. On their website they summed it up this way:

“..With food so central to daily life, it naturally follows that what we eat has a profound effect on our surroundings as well as the rural landscape of the countryside, the duration of tradition and the biodiversity of the earth. For a true gastronome, it is impossible to ignore the strong connections between plate and planet.”

This program is a good program that could be bigger than it already is. A lot of the projects they do are in countries other than the United States. This would be a good program to get started in the small towns of Iowa. People would be interested in it in my town, but they don't know about it. We could advertise it and have Slow Food be a part of the school curriculum especially in the foods classes. That would definitely become a big step in improving health education. It would help people realize that lifestyle is an important part of maintaining health.

In my school we had important state tests coming up and to better our test scores we had posters, letters sent home, and healthy snacks during the testing, all to encourage healthy eating. This project was sponsored by our Nutrition Coalition. The Nutrition Coalition had healthy snacks set out for us while we were testing. We ate the food and we liked it. There was fruit, nuts, vegetables, and yogurt (out of 148 cartons of yogurt, all but 2 were eaten!). If healthier food was more available in the schools then kids would eat it. The food was also set up attractively on the table and it made us want to eat it because it looked so good. The Nutrition Coalition gets a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for low income communities when they have enough groups joined in with them, in a network. Our county network includes: the hospital, the foods and physical education teachers from county schools, Iowa State Extension Service, Public Health Nurse, Day Care Providers, Home Care Agency for the elderly, early childhood educators from WIC (Women Infant Children) and Nest programs, congregate meal sites for the elderly, and the Area Recreation Director.

Active exercise is as important as nutrition in fighting obesity. Walking, running, dancing, and gardening are easy and fun ways of exercising. After their freshman year, Iowa high school kids are not required to take physical education if it does not fit their schedules. Because of the growing obesity problem, physical education should be mandatory. There are also voluntary programs that encourage people to exercise more. People like Betty Smith could become involved in a program our school is starting. There would be teams involving staff, students, and community; and they would write how many times they exercised, how long they did it and what they did. In the end of a given amount of time, the team with the most hours of exercise would win a prize. That's a good way of uplifting exercise because a lot of people would want to be a part of it since they enjoy competing. Single individuals like Betty Smith are encouraged by the group effort.

Networking is very important because different groups and organizations can get together to promote something that they all feel strongly about. Networking is all about working together to accomplish all of the same goals that the different groups and organizations share. Betty Smith and her family would hear the 'healthy food choices and more exercise' message at school, at the grocery store, at the doctor's office, and on the TV. If there was more networking going on then it would really be a contributing factor to the prevention of obesity and also educating Americans.

I think that working together and networking are key factors to stopping obesity. A lot of the problem is that people don't know a lot about obesity and they just don't realize what a big problem it has become. But all the statistics show that it has become a greater problem within these past years and we need to start doing something about it, otherwise more and more people will become obese. And emotionally, physically, mentally that is not healthy. Writing this paper has made me really think about all of my food choices more carefully and try to help others think about what that bottle of pop is going to do to them if they drink it. So I think we need to start getting people more educated about this issue.

Lifestyles do affect our diets and how much we weigh. The typical family is a single parent mother that doesn't have the time to do all these important things. And maybe that mother doesn't know how important the simple things are. I don't think many people realize that the lifestyles today are so different from the way that they used to be. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents didn't go about things the way we do today. They worked hard physically, were not so hurried, cared a lot about their families, and they tried to always sit down and share a meal together. Statistics show that lifestyle plays a major role in obesity.

Doing this research paper, I truly learned that food is much more than feeding my hunger. It is about heritage, culture, family traditions, colors, textures, participation, and conversation, bringing people together, and tasting all the wonderful flavors out there. Food is more than just food. It is culture, it is art, and it can be creative and fun. Charles, the Prince of Wales, sums it up nicely:

"The food you produce is far more than just food for it represents our entire culture – the culture of the family farm. It represents the ancient tapestry of rural life; the dedicated animal husbandry, the struggle with the natural elements, the love of the landscape, the childhood memories, the knowledge and wisdom learned from parents and grandparents, the intimate understanding of local climate and conditions and hopes and fears of succeeding generations. I salute you."

There is so much that we can do to help the awareness of obesity and of healthy choices for nutrition and exercise but there is so much work involved, it takes so much time, and takes so much effort; therefore, it is of utmost importance that every concerned person comes together that truly cares about this and does something about it. So that is my challenge to all of us. Participate in a network of healthy eaters and healthy exercisers. Start now!

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Slow Food

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The Sweetest Poison of All – Refined Sugar.

<http://www.karlloren.com/Diabetes/p82.htm>