

Don't Forget About Me!

Special Needs Children May Have Weight Disparity

Children with special needs are often overlooked in the growing problem of childhood obesity. Current data from Center for Disease Control (CDC) show that **17% of all children in the US** between the ages of 2 and 19 are obese. Special needs children represent over **13%** of school age children in the US, and are at even **greater risk** of having weight problems. Many factors **increase their risk** for gaining weight including food choices, reduced participation in physical activity and sometimes due to side effects of **certain medications**. These medications can increase their appetite and lead to overeating or decreased physical activity.



Numerous factors influence food choices such as culture, socioeconomic status, family meal patterns and nutrition knowledge and beliefs. Children with disabilities may have impaired cognition and communication skills which can limit understanding of how food and beverage choices impact health.

Research shows that nutrition education is Most effective when targeted to the family's food choices as well as in the child's classroom. Following sound health literacy principals is critical. When children are learning. Education that involves a multi-sensory approach seeing, feeling, smelling, reading and hearing as appropriate followed by discussion and experiential practice, children are better able to learn.

Physical activity plays an important role in increasing metabolic rate and burning calories. Increased use of technology also plays a role in the obesity epidemic. Children with disabilities face these as well as **additional barriers** Physical limitations such as impaired motor skills require specialized equipment or facilities that may limit the ability to exercise.

Stigma and discrimination are not uncommon for children with special needs and can lead to social isolation. Research illustrates discrimination to be a causative factor of depression. Depression is often associated with several changes in behavior including decreased activity levels and altered eating habits.

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The Missoula community is now offering "Health Fundango" a project based on health education and nutrition evaluation, along with the **CATCH Program** (Coordinated Approach to Child Health) to students in special education. CATCH teaches food and beverage selection and fun active physical play in the classrooms, on the play-ground, in the cafeteria and at home. Our local **YMCA** partners to offer sports programs to fit the needs of all interested families. Please share your ideas for enhancing the health of children with special needs in your community.

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