

# **The government should formulate policies to tackle the problem of childhood overweight in Hong Kong**

## **Introduction**

Hong Kong is a thriving metropolis. The prosperity of local society not only brings us the modern western diet culture but also makes people get accustomed to a “static” living style. All these impacts arising from “modernization” reduce the amount of exercise among children and they have more opportunity to eat more. According to the survey conducted by the Department of Health in 2006, almost one in five primary school pupils in Hong Kong is overweight. Moreover, the proportion of obese children to primary school kids rose from 16.4% in 1997/98 to 18.7% in 2004/05. A Chinese University survey has found that 42% of local adolescents between 11-18 years of age have problems with excessive body weight, high blood pressure, high blood sugar or abnormal blood fat levels. The situation is worth attention.

Overweight and obesity are regarded as corpulence. If the Body Mass Index of a child is at the top 15% of the same age group, he/she is considered overweight; if at the top 5% of the same age group, he/she is considered obese. Physically, corpulence increases a child’s chance

of suffering from chronic diseases and sleep apnea, or causes physical retardedness in children. Psychologically, these children tend to lack self-confidence, which affects their social lives.

According to Article 24 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. The government should therefore attach great importance to the treatment of illness and health care services for children. As children, we are highly concerned about the relevant issues. Thus, we ask for the Government to formulate policies in order to improve the situation of childhood overweight. This motion will analyze the current situation of diet and exercise among children in terms of family, school and society. Related suggestions will be put forward as well.

---

### **Questionnaire Survey**

From September to October in 2006, we conducted a questionnaire survey targeting primary and secondary school students aged 6 to 18. The survey covered about 20 schools and the rate of questionnaire return was 78% with the collection of 779 out of 1000 copies. The actual figures will be mentioned in the paragraphs below.

---

## **Family**

### **Current Situation:**

At present, some parents are not aware of the importance of a healthy diet. They often eat out and seldom take exercise, failing to set a good example for their children of leading a healthy life. Some of them even spoil their children and let them eat out, who then develop the habit of eating fried food or food with high sugar content. The survey shows that 60% of the parents do not have adequate knowledge of what is a healthy diet.

Parents do have a real influence on whether their children can develop a healthy diet and exercise habits. Very often, parents underestimate the importance of their roles in cultivating their children to lead a healthy life style.

### **Suggestions:**

Family sports not only improve parent-child relations, but also benefit children's mental and physical growth. Moreover, they help children foster good living habits. Thus we suggest that parents spend more time exercising with their children and encourage their children to eat more vegetables rather than food with a high fat level and high calorie.

In order to help parents convey the correct concept of health and exercise to their children, the Government should put in more resources in family education. For example,

they should try and explain to parents the importance of taking exercise, encourage parents to take part in health campaigns in schools and promote healthy life styles among students by introducing an awarding scheme. Through cooperation between family and school, parents can effectively educate their children about the concept and habit of “Balanced Diets and Regular Exercise”. Children will then pay more attention to exercise and diet, which will then improve the situation of childhood overweight in Hong Kong.

---

## **School**

### **Current Situation:**

The Department of Health together with the Committee on Home-School Cooperation and other organizations held a campaign entitled EatSmart@school.hk in schools in the 2006-2007 academic year to improve the eating habit of students. Apart from this, guidelines such as Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students and Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students have been set up in accordance with the recommendation provided by the World Health Organization. Although there are guidelines from the Department of Health for food suppliers’ reference, the guidelines are not bound by law. A lot of the tuckshops still sell unhealthy food that is high in sugar, fat and salt. This is a

disregard for the health of children. Some schools cannot effectively stop junk food from harming students because the contracts they have signed do not allow them to have control over those tuckshops. For example, the Guidelines on Meal Arrangements in Schools issued in 2002 states that schools are not encouraged to sell cooked food such as fried fish balls to children; however, not many schools act accordingly.

The present health services for overweight children provided by the Government are not comprehensive enough. The Student Health Service is the only program that offers related services. For example, some of the obese children may be referred to health centres or the Hospital Authority to undergo follow-up checks and counseling offered by dietitians. Other than that, there are no other resources available. Relatively minor cases are usually neglected and children who have the potential problem of overweight may not be identified because only limited locations have dietitians.

Compared with the situation in other countries, schools in Hong Kong spend less time in P.E. lessons, which is less than 2 hours a week. The duration of P.E. lessons for students of secondary four or above is often reduced so that they can prepare for the public examination. According to our survey, more than half of the primary school kids think that the number of hours spent on P.E. lessons is insufficient. It is thus clear that negligence of exercise is the cause for children not to be able to enjoy a well-rounded physical and mental development.

**Suggestions:**

We suggest that the Government follow the example of such countries as Britain where there is legislation against selling unhealthy food in schools. This suggestion is welcomed by 60% of the interviewees in our survey. We suggest spending four years on legislation and two years as a grace period. Prior to the legislation, we hope that the Government can put more resources into the Department of Health so as to promote the culture of healthy diets, and to create a social environment suitable for legislation.

We also suggest stationing dieticians in each and every district. The distribution of dieticians should be in ratio to the number of students in the various districts. The dieticians can take the initiative to single out overweight children, so that they can give appropriate guidance to them and follow up the cases. At the same time, they can design healthy menus for students, help promote the culture of healthy diets in schools and instill in students the concept of what a proper diet is.

For P.E. lessons, we suggest the stipulation of the minimum number of hours for students of secondary three or below. Two sessions of P.E. lessons, at least 60 minutes long in total, should be included in each teaching cycle. This can reinforce children's cognition of physical education, raise their awareness of its importance, and nurture in them a good habit of

exercise at a young age, which will lead to a balanced development in them both physically and psychologically.

---

## **Society**

### **(i) Food Package**

#### **Current Situation:**

Consumers are becoming increasingly more aware of the nutrition in food. According to our survey, 65% of the consumers check the labels on pre-packaged food before purchase. However, there is no law in Hong Kong that requires package labels to indicate the nutrition ingredients of the pre-packaged food. Even though there are some labels that show the nutrition ingredients of the food, this is only a voluntary act of the manufacturers. The information and specifications provided on the labels are varied, making the information on the nutrition labels difficult for consumers to comprehend. Worst still, consumers might be misled, which may directly or indirectly affect the health of children in Hong Kong.

Secondly, the Nutrition Declaration describes, suggests and implies the nutritional characteristics of food. It can be divided into two main categories: Nutrition Claim and

Nutrient Function Claim. The Nutrition Claim relates to the nutrient level found in a food, such as “high calcium”, “low fat” and “sugar-free”; while the Nutrient Function Claim relates to the functions of a nutrient, for example, “Reduced salt – the content of salt is 25% less than the regular products of the same brand”.

The Nutrition Claim is the most common form of declaration in the market. For the time being, there is no specific regulation supervising the wording and standard of the Nutrition Claim. It is difficult to know whether the Nutrition Claim is accurate or not. Thus, the public may easily be misled or cheated by manufacturers, and purchase pre-packaged food whose content is not true to its claims.

**Suggestions:**

According to our survey, 76.7% of the interviewed children think there is the need for the Government to legislate so that the manufactures must add nutrition labels on their pre-packaged food. We suggest that the Government accelerate the legislation process and make it a must for manufacturers to add nutrition labels on their pre-packaged food to show its nutrient content. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau should make legislative amendments as soon as possible and submit the amended version to the Legislative Council in 2007:

1. Enforce the first phase of law two years after the legislation in which two more core nutrients other than the suggested basal calorie, proteins, usable carbohydrates and fat shall be indicated on the labels on pre-packaged food. Enforce the second phase two years after the first phase has taken effect, in which all pre-packaged foods shall have to bear labels indicating their calory and nine of its core nutrients.
2. Standardize the specifications of the labels (including units, recommended content, etc.)
3. Stipulate that the nutrition ingredients and the content of each pack shall be listed on the nutrition labels.

In addition, the Government should continue its public education, enabling consumers to understand the meanings of the wording and numerical values on food labels.

We also suggest that the Government formulate a set of standards of Nutrition Declaration by referring to the Table of Conditions for Nutrient Content Claims of Codex Alimentarius Commission as soon as possible. The manufacturers have to print out the Nutrition Claim accordingly.

Clear legal definitions should be given to such terms used in comparative claims as “High”, “Less” and “Free”. Related nutrition content of such claims must be verified by accredited laboratories before the labels are stuck to the food.

**(ii) Media**

**Current Status:**

Children easily come across fast food advertisements when they watch television, but most of the food provided by fast food restaurants is unhealthy. Data show that these advertisements aim at promoting unhealthy food to children and frequent watching has a strong effect on children's choice of food.

**Suggestion:**

In order to reduce the interest of children to eat fast food, the HKSAR Government can follow the example of the USA in prohibiting the broadcasting of fast food advertisements in children's programmes from 16:00 to 20:00 every day. We suggest that the Government should legislate on the limitation of the time slot for fast food advertising, so that its influence on children's health can be minimized.

**Conclusion**

Children are our future, and their health means wealth for society.

Unfortunately, at the International Conference on Obesity held in Sydney, Australia, in September, 2006, experts warned that overweight now poses as a threat to children in becoming susceptible to serious diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and even stroke. The life span of the next generation may then be shortened. More alarmingly, the co-chair of the conference Professor Kate Steinbeck said that the children of this generation may be the first group in history to die earlier than their parents because of overweight.

We believe that everyone will agree that the life of every child is precious. However, if we continue to ignore the problem of childhood overweight, the situation will soon get out of control! We must confront the problem in order to let our children have a bright future. We do hope that the Government will formulate policies to tackle the problem of childhood overweight in Hong Kong.