• Encourage your children to exercise. Depending on their ages, children will enjoy different activities. Encourage outside play whenever possible. Older children may enjoy walking around the block with you after dinner, playing with a pet in the backyard, or riding bikes through the neighborhood. Set a good example by taking the stairs instead of the elevator or walking to the corner store instead of driving.

• Start slowly so your overweight child doesn’t feel too tired right away. If the activities are fun, he will be more likely to continue with them.

• Limit TV and computer time to less than two hours per day. Studies have shown that children who spend more time watching TV tend to be more overweight.

You can help your child control weight by teaching good eating and exercising habits. Provide healthy foods at regular times and help him increase his activity level. At the same time, avoid nagging or belittling him. Your support will help him control his weight and keep his self-esteem intact.
It’s normal for parents to be concerned about their children’s weight. After all, most of us are concerned about our own! The right weight for your child depends on his age and body structure, among other things. When a child has a weight problem, it may cause heartache for both the child and his parents.

What can you do to encourage good eating habits and a healthy weight?

Parents have three responsibilities:

- Offer nutritious foods at regular times. Planned meals and snacks provide regular sources of energy and help teach good eating habits.
- Help the child recognize when he’s hungry or full. This means not using the “clean-plate” rule and sometimes allowing second or third helpings.
- Set a good example. Children learn from your example. They notice your eating habits, whether you’re sitting in front of the TV with a bag of chips or drinking nothing but black coffee and exercising for hours.

How can I help my underweight child?

A child who is too thin needs as much emotional support as one who is too heavy. Look at the rest of your family and talk about body types that family members share. For example, it may make your child feel better to know that Dad was also thin as a child. Talking to a pediatrician can also help put your child’s size into perspective. He can reassure you that your child is growing at his own normal rate.

If a child suddenly loses a lot of weight, other medical or emotional problems could be the cause. Immediately talk to a doctor, dietician, or psychologist.

How can I help my overweight child?

First, make sure your child knows that you love her, no matter how heavy she is. Don’t make nagging comments about her weight because they could lead to serious problems with her self-esteem and body image.

Consider medical problems or emotional stress, which may cause her to gain weight more easily or to eat more. Children may also gain weight before a growth spurt.

Whatever you do, don’t put your child on a diet! Eating different food from the rest of the family will hurt more than help. In order to achieve a healthy weight for good, the family will need to make permanent changes in food choices and activity, which will benefit everyone. Weight loss is rarely recommended for a child. The goal is to maintain a weight until the child “grows into it.”

Here are some ways to help:

- Look at the food you serve. Choosing the right food is the most important part of weight control. Serve whole, natural foods that are low in fat such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean meats and fish. Limit the number of sodas and sweets you buy.
- Learn some cooking techniques to reduce fat. Bake, broil, boil and grill rather than fry. Use broth or water instead of oil to cook vegetables, and replace oil in baking with applesauce.
- Set regular meal and snack times. Don’t allow snacking while watching TV or reading.
- At the table, have your children wait five minutes before getting seconds. They may realize they’re not hungry after all. Serve meals directly from the pots to the plates. Putting serving bowls on the table might encourage children to eat seconds even when they’re not hungry.