

Patricia Dischler  
[pdischler@wildblue.net](mailto:pdischler@wildblue.net)  
[www.patriciadischler.com](http://www.patriciadischler.com)  
608-544-2733  
S11280 Fox Road  
Sauk City, WI 53583

## **Nothing to Lose: Keeping Your Child's Weight Healthy While in Daycare**

By Patricia Dischler

First the bad news. Studies have shown for awhile that children who are in daycare get sick more often and, as if that wasn't enough for parents to worry about, now researchers tell us that children in daycare tend to gain more weight than children home with their parents. What can working parents do to protect the health of their children when daycare is a necessity?

The good news is that there is much a parent can do. The factors leading to weight gain are often linked to parent behaviors and choices, rather than the daycare facilities themselves. Most states have strict nutritional guidelines for licensed daycare facilities to follow, so it is often the meals outside of daycare that contribute to weight gain. Where the risk lies is in a busy parent's schedule. This means that parents who make a conscience effort towards creating time for healthy eating habits for their children will be successful in avoiding the daycare weight gain.

A study conducted by Juhee Kim, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Karen E. Peterson, of the Harvard School of Public Health, and published in the July issue of the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, reported that children in part time care gained about 0.4 more pounds over nine months than infants cared for by their parents. The study followed 8,100 infants from birth to nine months between 2001 and 2002. Lack of breast feeding and early introduction of solid foods were cited as the leading risk factors associated with children in daycare. The study is considered a first step in identifying risk factors for childhood obesity.

As childhood obesity continues to rise, any factor contributing is important for parents to become aware of in order to create a plan before the pounds begin to add up. Understanding the risk factors of having children in daycare that contribute to weight gain will provide parents with a roadmap for success.

The following 5 guidelines will help you avoid the risks of weight gain for children in daycare:

1. Send breast milk for infants. Lack of breast-feeding is an established factor for weight gain in infants. Also, the early introduction of solid foods contributes to weight gain in infants. Most pediatricians recommend waiting until 6 months, to up to a year old, before introducing solids. Talk with your doctor and then be clear with your provider about the guidelines you would like to be followed. More and more workplaces are supporting breast-feeding by providing employees a private area for pumping during the work day. Take the time to ask your employer about it before going back to work. By sending along breast milk for your daycare provider to feed your infant you are giving them all the nutrients they need and antibodies to help protect them.
2. Avoid fast food. Today's parents are so busy that by the time they have picked up their child from daycare and ran a few errands it becomes too late to cook a wholesome home-cooked meal so many parents resort to the quick fix – the drive through. Taking time in the morning, or on the weekend, to plan ahead can help parents avoid this trap. Pre-cooking meals over the weekend that can be warmed up each evening, using a crock pot to cook a meal during the day (see sidebar), or at least making healthy choices for picking up food (such as getting a broasted chicken and some vegetables from the local supermarket deli) will add up to a week of healthy eating.
3. Make meal time a family time. Sitting down to eat a nutritious meal together not only gives your family time to reconnect after a busy day, it teaches children the importance of taking the time for healthy eating. Children who are eating small amounts on the go or while watching TV tend to eat foods such as chips, fried foods, and soda. Showing children that meals are made up of a variety of healthy foods rather than a culmination of unhealthy snacks gets them on the right track.
4. Create family nights for play. Children learn through modeling. When the adults around them are active, children will follow suit. After a meal together, get the children outside and take a bike ride together, go for a walk, fly a kite, play catch with the dog. (See sidebar for more ideas.) Make time to be active together and reap the benefits of healthy living and family togetherness.
5. Plant a garden. Children love to eat what they grow. For those little ones that turn up their nose at any vegetable, give them their own little plot for a garden. If you don't have a yard for one, put plants in pots on your porch, or inside near a window. You can grow grape tomatoes, string beans, carrots, just about any vegetable in a pot. You'll connect your children to where their food comes from and they'll be more apt to want to give it a taste when they are a part of the process.

Karen Skor, mother of 2 boys and busy realtor from Wisconsin knows how difficult it can be to avoid the fast food pitfall. "Sometimes, by the time I've finished work and picked up my kids they're hungry and don't want to wait while I cook dinner, it's so easy to hit the drive through and get it done. But my kid's health is important to me, so now when I'm running late, I'll stop by the grocery deli before picking them up to get some baked ham or chicken. When we get home, while my youngest sets the table and my oldest son gets out some bread and fruit, I pop some frozen veggies in the microwave, slice up the meat and in 5 minutes we're ready to sit down together as a family for a healthy meal."

Your child need not become a statistic of weight gain in daycare, parents have the power to instill in their child the habits and knowledge of healthy eating and living. The benefits are inspiring. Another report in the same issue as the study above found that adults that had good nutrition in early childhood scored better on intelligence tests, including higher scores for reading comprehension and cognitive function. As with so much more in a young child's life, nutrition has a lasting effect on their abilities as an adult.

Creating family time where parents can model healthy choices greatly affects how your child will view food in their life. Parents have such a large influence on a child's eating habits. Busy parents with little or no time for cooking healthy meals need to look for new alternatives that still support their family's health. By avoiding the risks and planning for success, parents will find that in the long run their child will have nothing to lose!

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Patricia Dischler is an early childhood expert, author, and national speaker. Her book, *From Babysitter to Business Owner*, is a guideline to high quality in child care. To see her books and sign up for her free child care newsletter visit: [www.patriciadischler.com](http://www.patriciadischler.com).

### ***SIDEBARS:***

#### **3 Ingredient Quick Fix Crock Pot Dinners**

Putting together healthy meals for your family can be as easy as 1, 2 3! With the help from a crock pot and a few basic ingredients, you'll have a hot, wholesome meal waiting for you when you get home.

Choose 1 from each category:

Meat: Chicken, Beef or Pork

Vegetable: Potatoes, Carrots, Green Beans, Peas, Corn, Broccoli, Cauliflower (or a combination of favorite vegetables)

Sauce: Any flavor of cream soup, or cheese soup.

In crock pot combine 2 cups of diced meat, 2 cups diced vegetable and 1 can of soup. Set crock pot on low in morning. In evening, stir, and serve with whole wheat bread or rolls and a fresh fruit. Serves a family of four.

### **Fun Family Nights**

After sharing a nutritious meal, get your family moving with the following activities:

Take a walk.

Play tag.

Play ball games: basketball, volleyball, baseball, football.

Play leapfrog.

Go bicycling.

Play "Follow the Leader."

Play hopscotch.

Try roller blading.

Roll down a hill.

Do cartwheels.

Jump rope.