

## Guest column: Obese children will suffer in life unless we take action to help their futures

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Childhood obesity is a rising problem with lifelong consequences, including heart disease and diabetes, diseases that used to be seen just in middle-age and older adults.  
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Louisiana ranks sixth nationally in the prevalence of childhood obesity.

Our state has been at or near the bottom of so many "bad" lists for so long that lots of us have grown numb to these sorts of rankings. But we can't afford indifference if we are going to curb this public health crisis, which threatens the health of our children, our children's children, and the very future of Louisiana.

The good news is there are lots of ways to help. Let's start by having an honest conversation about childhood obesity. Let's see obesity for what it is: a disease.

Every one of us knows someone — a friend, a relative, a co-worker — whose child struggles with obesity. It doesn't mean your child is weak-willed or lazy. Childhood obesity isn't about parents who won't do the right thing or make the hard decisions to help their kids.

There are dozens of biological, genetic and environmental factors that contribute to a child's risk of obesity. Few of these causes lie within a parent's control, much less their child's. The evidence shows, and the medical community recognizes, that obesity is a complex, chronic disease.

Yet obesity remains one of the only illnesses where we blame the patient.

The evidence also shows that this approach is disastrous. Fat-shaming only leads to a downward spiral of lower self-esteem, depression, and more weight gain.

That's why we need to change the conversation about obesity. Our country, state and communities have made enormous strides in addressing other public health issues, such as substance abuse and addiction, by shifting the narrative.

At Pennington Biomedical, the TEAM UP program led by Dr. Amanda Staiano, associate professor of pediatric obesity and health behavior, is bringing evidence-based weight-management and nutrition counseling to pediatricians' offices to help children and their parents improve their health. We're also using technology to help families lose weight and fight type-2 diabetes together. The Healthy Beginnings program led by our Dr. Leanne Redman, professor of endocrinology and women's health, is an online program designed to help women maintain a healthy pregnancy weight and prevent gestational diabetes.

September is National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month. Let's mark it by putting an end to the stigma of obesity. Let's stop the blaming and shaming. Let's clear away the misconceptions. If we don't, the current trends will continue. Already nearly 40% of Louisiana's children are overweight or have obesity. Most of them, regardless of their current body mass index, will become adults with obesity and its related health issues: heart disease, type-2 diabetes and more than a dozen deadly cancers.

Unless we take action now.

All it takes to start is an honest conversation.

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