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# Preventing Obesity in Children

## The Time Is Right for Policy Action

U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski

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**I**ncreasingly, research shows that chronic ailments, such as obesity, are affecting more and more of our children each year. Throughout our nation, people are demanding action to combat rising obesity rates in children and in controlling healthcare costs. But we need to look to prevention first. And where do we start? With living healthy lifestyles, eating right, and getting regular exercise. While changing these behaviors sound simple, doing so is complex, as illustrated in the excellent set of articles in this supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.<sup>1-14</sup>

I have been a strong advocate for finding ways to improve the food offerings in our schools, so that parents can know that their children have healthy food options available to them. As both a Senator, and more importantly, a parent of two school-aged boys, I know first-hand of the poor dietary temptations that are readily available to them each day at school.

We all know the problem, and we all know that eating the right amount of healthy foods and getting enough exercise are the answers to preventing overweight, obesity, and all the related serious health problems and costs.

Recent studies show that between 1980 and 2000, the prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents nearly tripled. And in my home state of Alaska, recent estimates show that obesity kills nearly 500 Alaskans each year—that is simply an unacceptable figure.

Last month, the Institute of Medicine<sup>15</sup> reported findings that the rise in obesity over the past 2-3 decades has been accompanied by an increase in the number of alternative food options available on school campus—especially vending machines. And yet another disturbing report has found that of all the babies born in 2000, 1 in 3 will become overweight.

But where do we begin in our effort to fight these terrible statistics? Certainly we look to the habits learned at home, but we also must take a look at the nutritional options our kids have at school. These statistics should cause us to pause . . . to reflect on our policies on foods sold in schools.

At school, our children learn in health class to eat five fruits or vegetables a day. But then they go to the

cafeteria where they are able to buy soda, potato chips, and a candy bar for lunch. Not exactly a “well balanced” meal. And despite major changes in nutritional science, the current federal laws defining nutritional standards for what can be sold in school vending machines and school stores have not been updated in almost 30 years.

I believe Congress has an obligation to see to it that there is an update of these standards and to help ensure that our children have healthy food options readily available in schools.

That is why Senator Tom Harkin and I have re-introduced The Child Nutrition Promotion & School Lunch Protection Act. This legislation would require the Secretary of Agriculture to update the definition of “foods of minimal nutritional value” based on the recommendations from scientific and nutritional experts so that all foods that are sold in school—whether in the cafeteria or in a vending machine—meet high nutritional standards.

Now this doesn't mean that mom cannot bring in a birthday cake to celebrate her son's birthday—or that the school band or chess club cannot hold a fundraiser with baked treats.

What it does is ensure that our kids are receiving a consistent, simple message: They should be eating healthy foods. These foods need to be available in their schools.

And parents around the nation are showing their support for our efforts. A national poll by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation<sup>16</sup> found that 90% of teachers and parents support the conversion of school vending machine contents to healthy beverages and foods.

But it's more than just the food we provide for our kids . . . It's also about healthy lifestyles.

And when it comes to promoting active lifestyles for our kids, we need to ask ourselves—Are we sending the right messages? Just last week, I was told about a new trend in “playing” that is increasingly becoming popular with children. Rather than going outside to run around, hit the playground, or ride a bike—all great, physical activity—more and more kids are setting up “virtual playgrounds” online. They are “playing” through their computers, never leaving the confines of their home, let alone their computer chair. What kind of message does it send to our children for us to allow them to forgo normal childhood activities, activities

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that we all enjoyed as kids and ones that kept us physically active, and replace that with a computer.

Simply put, we are seeing more and more of our children with exercise deficits.

As parents, we want our children to be healthy and to grow up with healthy habits. Part of our responsibility to them is to help them make good nutritional decisions and engage in active lifestyles. I believe that through Senator Harkin's and my legislation and by setting the right examples, we can take a vital step forward to combat the overweight and obesity epidemic that is afflicting so many of our children.

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