



Michelle Obama to fight child obesity at grass roots

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Calling obesity an epidemic and one of the greatest threats to America's health and economy, first lady [Michelle Obama](#) said Wednesday that she would launch a major initiative next month to combat the problem in childhood.

Obama, speaking at a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, said the idea was simple: "To put in place common-sense initiatives and solutions that empower families and communities to make healthy decisions for their kids."

The initiative will involve the federal government working with local officials and leaders in the business and non-profit sectors, she said, to provide more nutritious food in schools, allow more opportunities for kids to be physically active and give more communities access to affordable, healthful food.

Obama has said she hopes one of her legacies will be her work in reducing childhood obesity, an effort she already has begun by planting the [White House](#) garden and joining in physical activities with children.

She told the mayors that as much as she has read and talked about the problem, "the statistics never fail to take my breath away."

About 32% of children and adolescents are obese or overweight, government statistics show. Almost 20% of children ages 6 to 11 and 18% of those ages 12 to 19 are obese. Such children are at a greater risk for weight-related health problems such as high cholesterol and diabetes, and they have an increased chance of becoming obese adults.

Donna Ryan, president of the Obesity Society, a group of weight-management researchers and professionals, says it's crucial to address the problem early: "If you can get kids into healthier eating habits when they are younger, their weight may self-correct." But once they become obese adults, it's difficult to reverse, she says.

Influence as first lady, parent

Weight-management experts have expressed hope that Obama will have an influence.

"Everybody has been wringing their hands for a decade about what a big problem this is, but having the first lady involved could really make a difference," says Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "The first lady not only brings the weight of the White House, but she also understands this issue as a parent."

Obama acknowledged the difficulties parents face. "It wasn't that long ago that I was juggling a full-time job with the round-the-clock role of being a mom," she said. "And there were plenty of times when after a long day at work, when the fridge was empty and the kids were hungry, that I just ordered that pizza, because it was easier. Or we went to the drive-through for burgers, because it was cheap and quick. And I wasn't always aware of how all the calories and fat in some of the processed foods I was buying were adding up."

"It got to the point where our pediatrician had to tap me on the shoulder and say, 'You know, you might want to consider making some changes in your family's diet.' "

She said many parents "desperately want to do what's right. ... But too often, the realities of modern life make it feel like the deck is stacked against them."

They're tight on money and time, she said. Their communities lack markets that sell fresh produce. The physical-education and recreation programs have been cut back at their schools.



"They're inundated with news reports filled with conflicting information and with food labels filled with ingredients they can't even pronounce, let alone know whether those ingredients are healthy."

'We have everything we need'

Tackling the problem has been gaining momentum recently. On Monday, an expert panel recommended that physicians and other medical professionals screen children ages 6 and older for obesity and refer obese children to comprehensive weight-management programs.

Right now, there aren't enough weight-management programs for children, and those programs aren't covered by most insurance plans, experts say. The new recommendation may help change that.

Obama told the mayors she knows childhood obesity is a tough problem.

"This isn't the kind of problem that can be solved in one year, or even one administration," she said. "But make no mistake about it, this problem can be solved.

"We don't need to wait for some new invention or discovery to make this happen. This doesn't require fancy tools or technologies. We have everything we need right now — we have the information, we have the ideas, and we have the desire to start solving America's childhood obesity problem.

"The only question is whether we have the will."

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