

Parents: Address root cause of obesity

MEASURING pupils' body mass indices (BMIs) may not be a good solution to tackle the issue of obesity and may also unnecessarily increase teachers' workload, said Melaka Action Group for Parents in Education chairman Mak Chee Kin.

"What is the point of knowing whether pupils are overweight, obese and so on, if there are no long-term solutions to tackle this issue? Parents, canteen operators and school management have a role to play," he said, adding that it's important for parents to lead by example as many of them eat unhealthy food and drinks, such as fast food and carbonated drinks.

As a result, children tend to follow in their parents' footsteps. Instead of measuring their BMIs, a better solution would be to allow pupils to engage in physical activities during recess, he suggested.

"Let them play and run around. There are many traditional games that require minimal equipment, like galah panjang, batu seremban and hide-and-seek.

"Unfortunately, parents and most school administrations are not in favour of such activities as they are worried pupils will injure themselves. This mindset must change if we want to cultivate a healthy society," he said.

What parents feed their children, said Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, could depend on the environment they live in.

Low-income (B40) families fall either in the urban poor or rural categories, she explained, adding that the urban poor, not having a place to grow their own food, may feed their children whatever that is convenient and available such as processed food which may not necessarily constitute a healthy and balanced meal.

"Even local fruits are expensive for them. Families who live in a rural setting, on the other hand, may grow fruits and vegetables as they have ample land to do so.

"A nearby river may even provide a source of protein like fish. Hence, rural B40 families may be able to provide their children with a healthier and balanced diet compared to their urban counterparts," she said.

And whether parents can provide their children with balanced meals, depends on their disposable income, she added.

"They feed their children with what they can afford and what their children want to eat. It could be the school curriculum and teachers' influence that end up shaping the pupils' views on the importance of a balanced meal.

"This, in turn, could result in the children influencing their parents' purchasing habits," she said.



Mak



Noor Azimah

THE DISCOURSE

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KNOWING what encompasses a healthy lifestyle should start from a young age.

Educating schoolchildren on its importance is vital if we are to raise a healthy and active generation of youths.

The Education Ministry's recently announced BMI 5-9T (*see info-box*), which focuses on tackling obesity among pupils aged five to nine by measuring their body mass indices (BMIs), is important but Nutrition Society of Malaysia president Dr Tee E. Siong cautioned that if not handled properly, it could backfire, causing children to ridicule each other over their weight.

"For this reason, it has to be properly implemented by nutritionists instead of teachers, with the participation of parents, as nutritionists are professionally trained to carry out the measurements.

"This is especially important for young children, where errors in measurement can make the BMI value invalid," he told *StarEdu*.

Having nutritionists in schools to conduct the checks, which will be done twice a year on an annual basis for children of that age group, will allow the process to be done in a more professional manner as these professionals are trained to use their discretion in handling BMI data, he said.

Nutritionists do not publicly name children who are not within the healthy range; are trained to do follow-ups for children who are out of the healthy range, such as those who are underweight, overweight and obese; and can provide the necessary advice to parents in helping these children attain and maintain a healthy body weight, he explained.

"This includes healthy eating messages and doing physical activities. In severe cases, nutritionists can even make a referral to the relevant professionals for additional treatment.

"If BMI 5-9T is properly carried out with nutritionists handling the activities, our children will benefit greatly. Nutritionists can conduct a number of other food and nutrition-related activities, as well as simple nutrition messages," he said, adding that these messages can have a lasting impact on children well into adulthood.

Get parents involved

Parents, Dr Tee said, must

Need for nutritionists

Proper diet and conducive environment as crucial as BMI checks in weight management, experts say



Starting them young: Dr Hazreen said schools should look into activities such as inculcating the habit of planting vegetables among their students. – Filepic

be kept informed of their children's BMI measurements and other nutrition-related matters, stressing that they should also familiarise themselves with BMI measurements and learn how to carry them out by themselves.

Universiti Malaya Assoc Prof Dr Hazreen Abdul Majid echoed Dr Tee's sentiment, stating that if programmes like the BMI 5-9T are to be done effectively, parents should be informed of the outcome so as to enable them to plan their next steps.

Dr Hazreen is the Medicine Faculty's Centre for Population Health, Social and Preventive Medicine Department head.

It's extremely important to carry out BMI checks correctly, he said.

"Monitoring their weight and height is a good start because that is how you want to monitor whether they are in the healthy weight range.

"But bear in mind that during this period, children are growing so we should not only look at their BMIs for age, but we should also monitor their weight circumference.

"The weight circumference for

older children will be able to tell if they have more composition of fat in their abdomens," said Dr Hazreen, who is also an adjunct professor at Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia, and a Universiti Malaya Medical Centre consultant dietician.

Other methods to effectively implement the BMI 5-9T programme include educating the pupils on why their BMIs are being checked, as well as changing parents' perception that their overweight children are "cute".

He also emphasised that collaboration is key, stating that there must be cooperation between schools, parents and parent-teacher associations.

Schools should look into activities such as inculcating the habit of planting vegetables among their students, he added.

"The ministry could work with universities which have done studies to show evidence of unhealthy lifestyle practices, as well.

"These are important steps because it's easy to come up with such plans but often, we do not



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follow up properly.

"We say we want our children to eat healthier, but how are we educating them? What kind of knowledge are we giving them? What if they want to bring food from home? Are they given ideas of what they can bring?"

"How healthy is the food that's being sold in school canteens? We must ensure there are healthy options for students, while reducing items like sweet drinks and foods like sausages, as well as implementing strict guidelines and regulations (on canteen operators)."

Some parents may contend that their children are small eaters despite being overweight so it is crucial to take note of the latter's eating habits, said Dr Hazreen.

Questions like "What are they consuming – is it a drink that is high in sugar? Is the cheese high in fat? Will it fill their stomachs?"

THE VIEWS

Mums, pupils on active, healthy living...

"ALTHOUGH I prefer indoor activities like art and craft and board games, I keep myself active by participating in school activities such as dancing.

SK Alam Mega 3, Shah Alam, Year One pupil Jasmine Khaira

"MY teachers are always telling us about food and nutrition, and why we should eat healthy. I think it is good but I do not like healthy food. Fast food tastes nicer compared to vegetables and fruits which look and taste weird.

SK Taman Muda, Kuala Lumpur, Year Three pupil Muhammad Faris Syahmi Sharizal

"I CAN only cook healthy meals for my family during weekends because as a working mother, it can be really challenging to prepare healthy dishes daily. Although I don't make my children do any specific exercises, I take them to parks during weekends. They used to cycle and swim prior to Covid-19. The pandemic forced us to be creative with our energetic kids. My husband and I built our own little playground at the corner of our house for the kids to play.

Mother-of-three Mardiyana Ayuni

