

The battle against fast food begins in the home
The Sacramento Bee, Tues., December 17, 2002
By Daniel Weintraub

1 A public health group called last week for Gov. Gray Davis to declare childhood obesity a state emergency and take immediate steps to reduce it. But while the California Center for Public Health Advocacy proposes some worthy ideas, the foundation might be aiming at the wrong target.

2 Parents, not state government, are in the best position to fight the epidemic of overweight children in our schools.

3 It is parents – not the government, not the fast-food companies, not the video-game manufacturers – who are responsible for teaching kids healthy eating and exercise habits. Can they use some help? Sure. But they are the ones who need to step up to the plate, so to speak.

4 Child fitness is getting more and more attention these days, and rightly so. But the danger in well-meaning studies and, even more, in lawsuits against the fast food industry, is that they send a message to parents and kids alike that obesity is somebody else's fault.

5 It's not. It's the fault of parents who let their kids eat unhealthy foods and sit in front of the television or computer for hours at a time. The sooner we face up to the fact as a society, the sooner we are going to be able to do something about it.

6 Last week's report from the Center for Public Health Advocacy took data already published by the state Department of Education and crunched it to make it more relevant to politicians. The center presented the data by state Assembly district, so that members of the Legislature could see where their communities ranked on the fat index.

7 Statewide, the center said, 26 percent of schoolchildren are overweight. The numbers ranged from a low of 17 percent in wealthy Orange County Assembly district to a high of 36.8 percent in an inner-city Los Angeles district. More boys (32 percent) than girls (21 percent) were overweight. And more minorities than white children were overweight, though the study's authors said the data didn't allow them to draw any conclusions as to why that was so.

8 The center blamed the problem on the increasing consumption of fast food and soft drinks, larger portion sizes in restaurants, the availability of junk food on campus, advertising of junk food to children and their families, and the lack of consistent physical education programs in the schools.

9 The authors recommended that the state enforce an existing law requiring an average of at least 20 minutes per day of physical education, implement a state law outlining nutritional standards for elementary schools, and ensure that water fountains are present and working on every campus.

10 Many of the report's long-term recommendations focused on the fast-food-industry: hearings to examine the impact of advertising on kids; a study to examine the prevalence of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores near

schools; and incentives for communities that ban fast food outlets near schools or that ban advertising for junk food on campus.

11 Of the 20 recommendations put forward by the center, only one focused on parents. The authors suggest that schools be required to provide parents with fitness test results on their children and information about the importance of daily physical activity for learning and lifelong good health.

12 But none of the center's other ideas are likely to do much good until parents understand and accept their role in fighting the problem. We have laws against parents' leaving a loaded weapon where their children can find it and use it to hurt themselves or others. But no one seems to want to tell parents that they need to protect their children from unhealthy foods and from sloth.

13 It's not easy, especially when both parents are working, or there is only one parent in the home. Fast food is fast. It can also seem cheap, at least before you start adding the fries and sodas and desserts. And a television or video game can be like an opiate that quiets a restless child so a weary parent can get some rest of his own.

14 My own home is by no means a fast-food-free zone or a shrine to physical fitness. But we've tried to take a few modest steps to give our kids a fighting chance. We don't stock soda in the kitchen or serve it regularly at home; it's a treat saved for special occasions.

15 We try to cook as many meals at home as possible on the theory that even the least-healthy home-cooked meal is probably better for our children than the healthiest fast-food serving. We limit television time and encourage our boys to get out of the house, either to participate in organized sports or to ride their bikes, skateboards or roller blades.

16 If the health-care foundations did more to encourage these kinds of simple policies in the home, they might make some progress against the purveyors of fat and cholesterol, whether they are pushing their wares on the street a block from the school, in the cafeteria or even in the classroom. Before we start talking about banning fast food, let's do more to encourage personal responsibility.