



The Issue of Child Obesity



According to the Childhood Obesity Foundation, child obesity or childhood obesity is defined as “the abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health ... [affecting] children and teenagers”. International obesity rates are rising, and research suggests that there are around 770 million obese people around the world (having a BMI of over 30) and over 125 million of these are children and adolescents.

In 2015, China had 15 million obese children, and while this may seem like a lot, compared to the Chinese child population (0 – 19) of 316 million in 2015, this is only about 5%. In 2016, in England, the NHS estimated that 16% of children aged 2 – 15 were overweight, over 3 times as many proportionally as China, especially considering that this figure doesn't account for the 0 – 2 years old and the 15 – 19 years old age groups. This demonstrates that although some countries have much higher numbers of obese children, which is a big problem, proportionally they do not have as many so their overall child population is not deemed as obese as countries such as the UK.

Childhood obesity is a problem because it has many possible short-term and long-term detrimental effects to the child's health such as type 2 diabetes, arthritis at a young age and Blount disease (where excess weight on developing bones leads to bone deformity of lower legs). This obesity can lead not only to physical health problems but also an increase in mental health problems, such as severe depression.

As the children of today are the future work force, this is an issue that will have to be solved as with more overweight and obese children, less will be able to work in the future as once weight gets to a certain level, mobility can be greatly limited. This may also lead to a decrease in the economic activity of a nation, especially emerging nations, such as Mexico, as child obesity is generally much more prevalent in emerging nations.

In the UK, in March 2016, the government announced that a sugar tax would be placed on sugary soft drinks from 2018. This was done to tackle the increase in obesity and type 2 diabetes and taxed the soft drinks industry for drinks with a total sugar content of over 5g/100ml which applied to Coca-Cola, Red Bull and Irn Bru. However, this only puts a very small dent in the problem as it is only currently adopted by the UK and only makes sugary drinks more expensive.

There is another issue in the problem of child obesity which worsens the problem; the number of advertisements that almost glamorize foods that have a high sugar, salt and saturated fat content and make them seem healthy. This is a problem in more developed countries with child obesity such as the USA and the UK. This can lead children, who are generally more naïve than adults, to buy “unhealthy” snacks or “junk food” as the adverts seem to portray the food as having wonderful feel-good effects. This is proven by a study that concluded that “children aged 6 to 13 who were shown commercials for high fat and high carbohydrate foods were more likely to pick meals that were bad for them”. These unhealthier foods that children are more likely to eat can lead to the problem of childhood obesity.

Points to consider:

- What is the prevalence of childhood obesity in your country?
- Does your country permit all (junk) food adverts at any time on radio, TV etc?
- Has your country placed a tax on sugary/salty/high in saturated fat and carbohydrates foods? Is your country currently implementing such a tax?
- What kind of services does your country offer to help obese children? Are they sufficient enough?

Useful links:

- The World CIA Fact Book <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
- The WHO www.who.int/
- Wikipedia – Child Hood Obesity https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Childhood_obesity