

# **Winning The War Against Childhood Obesity**



**By Tony Marchegiani**

In the 1970's, 5% of the children in the U.S. were obese according to the CDC. Today, the obesity prevalence is 13.9% among 2- to 5-year-olds, 18.4% among 6- to 11-year-olds. Many reasons have been given for the alarming increase of obese kids since the 1970's including genetics, metabolism, community and neighborhood design and safety, just to name a few. However, we can simplify the main contributing factors to the childhood obesity epidemic by looking at the two main differences between the kids of the 70's and today: Kids today eat more and engage in little to no physical activity. According to U.S. news, today's children eat about 350 calories a day more than did kids in the 1970s. In 2016, overall physical activity of children received a grade of D- by the U.S. Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. So how do we reverse this trend?

The first step to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic is making sure children get in 3 hours of physical playtime everyday. I know many parents will say this idea is simply not practical due to lack of time for both parents and kids, lack of resources, and locations. Let's look at several solutions for each of these seemingly impassable obstacles.

First, let's discuss the lack of time children seemingly have due to homework. The National PTA recommends 10-20 minutes per night in the first grade, and an additional 10 minutes per grade level thereafter. In the study involving questionnaires filled out by more than 1,100 English and Spanish speaking parents of children in kindergarten through grade 12, researchers found children in the first grade had up to three times the homework load recommended by the NEA and the National PTA. Both the school board and parents need to work together on this issue by making sure schools abide by the 10 minute rule with a 1 hour cap on homework for students K-8.

Next, let's discuss another reason why kids may not have enough time to exercise. In 2009, the Nielsen Co. reported that children's television viewing had reached an eight-year high. Children ages 2 to 5 watched TV for more than 32 hours a week. Kids ages 6 to 8 spent 28 hours per week in front of the tube. The Kaiser Family Foundation also conducted research on the media habits of children ages 8 to 18. Kaiser found that on average, this age group spends 4½ hours each day watching TV in various forms, including on their mobile phones and computers. It's the responsibility of the parents, not the government or children, to regulate time spent on the computer playing video games or watching TV. Simply slash 90 minutes of TV and computer time every day. Combining less TV and computer time along with the National PTA recommended daily homework time will create 2 hours of daily physical play. I know, that's only 2 hours. Where do we find 1 extra hour of physical play?

Parents must band together and demand their children's school add a daily 1 hour PE class or as I prefer to call it, fitness class. According to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition, only Oregon and the District of Columbia meet the national recommendations for weekly time (150 minutes) in physical education at both elementary and middle school levels. Just 3 states, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Florida, require schools to provide the nationally recommended 150+ min.- per week of PE in elementary schools. Many states (31) allow other activities as substitutions for physical education credit and more than half of state policies (30) allow student exemptions from physical education class time or credit. A few states (15) allow school districts to apply for a waiver from the state physical education requirements. This is unacceptable.

The daily one hour fitness class I'm proposing begins with 10 minutes of basic calisthenics, such as push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, etc., followed by 50 minutes of an active sport such as touch football, soccer, basketball, etc. Fitness class doesn't have to be limited to team sports. Fun games such as tag, red light green light, red rover, capture the flag, etc. are great physical activities to include as well. Whether it's team sports or fun games, the main objective of a fitness class is to keep kids moving as much as possible through out the entire class.

One argument I've heard several times is that a one hour fitness class scheduled during the day is not feasible on a daily basis. There are two options to tackle this issue. Option one, extend each day school by 1 hour. Option 2, shave 5-7 minutes off each class including lunch and, if need be, recess. Bottom line, FIND A WAY!

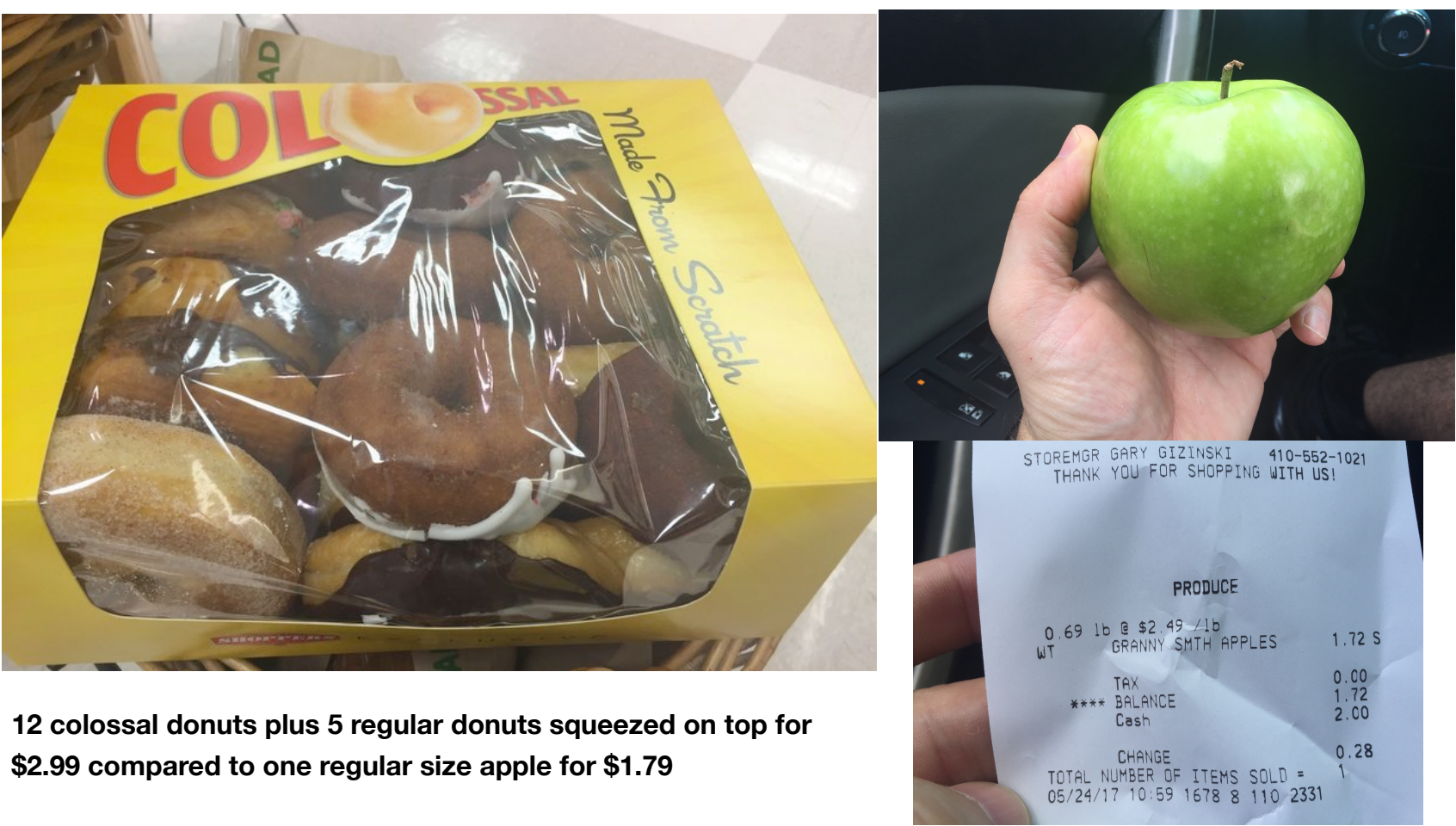
Lastly, let's discuss locations of after school physical play. If you're lucky enough to live in an area with virtually no car traffic, simply allow your kids to play in the neighborhood. What if you live in a high traffic area with no yards or playgrounds within walking distance? I have two options: First, children should be given full access to outdoor school fields and indoor courts after the school day is over. 1-2 volunteers can supervise the children, if necessary, while they play. Volunteers would be made up of teachers, parents, and non-profit organizations such as Big Brothers and Sisters Of America. Between all the parents, teachers, and volunteer groups, each adult shouldn't have to watch the kids more than once or twice a year.

The second option would be to create a local neighborhood play group on Facebook. The play group could include such information as the names of all the kids and parents, location of where the children will play, names and contact information of the daily volunteer(s), and pick up time. When the school day is over, school buses can drive the kids directly to predetermined playtime location. Locations can include recreational and community centers, churches, parks, ball fields, etc. Local businesses with access to large grassy areas, vacant lots, or large indoor facilities could be given a tax deduction for providing a safe space for children to play. Once again, parents, grandparents, and volunteer groups



can supervise the children. There are also many websites devoted to finding you volunteers such as, Stand Up For Kids, Volunteer Match, Network Good,etc.

Now, lets talk food. The United States government needs to levy a tax on sugar, junk food, and processed foods. A few months back I purchased a regular apple for \$1.79. The next day I walked into Shoppers Food Warehouse and noticed they had a special deal on day old colossal donuts. Let me give you some perspective on the size of these donuts. One Krispy Creme glazed donut is 190 calories and contains 11 grams of fat and 10 grams of sugar. One colossal glazed donut has a whopping 626 calories and contains 30 grams of fat and 31 grams of sugar. So what was the special deal? A box of 12 colossal donuts for \$2.99. And some of these boxes had 5 regular sized donuts shoved into the box..... at no extra charge. These are daily deals I've seen at several other grocery stores as well.



**12 colossal donuts plus 5 regular donuts squeezed on top for \$2.99 compared to one regular size apple for \$1.79**

How is this possible? Currently, instead of taxing sodas and other unhealthy food, our government subsidize them (with,I might note, tax dollars!). Direct subsidies to farmers for crops like corn (used, for example, to make now-ubiquitous high-fructose corn syrup) and soybeans (vegetable oil) keep the prices of many unhealthy foods and beverages artificially low. There are indirect subsidies as well, because prices of junk foods don't reflect the costs of repairing our health and the environment.

What will it take to get kids,and adults for that matter, to change their eating habits? Rather than subsidizing the production of unhealthy foods, we should turn the tables and tax sugary drinks, sugary foods such as cake and doughnuts, and hyperprocessed

snacks. The resulting income should be earmarked for healthier food such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, seasonal greens, and dried legumes.

One need not look further than our neighbor to the south, Mexico, as an example of how taxing sugary beverages and junk food would reduce consumption. In 2014, Mexico enacted taxes on producers and importers of sugar sweeten beverages and of “junk food”. i.e., calorie dense processed food. The tax on sweeten beverages is one peso per liter, equivalent to roughly 0.2 cents per ounce or 9 percent of average prices. Initial reports suggest the beverage tax has been more than passed through to consumers, with retail prices increasing about 12 percent. As a result, soda purchases declined by 12 percent while water consumption rose by 4%. Simply put: taxes would reduce consumption of unhealthful foods while increasing consumption of healthy foods and generate billions of dollars annually.

Another example how taxing a product can change people’s behaviors is by looking at the history of tobacco. The Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act of 1965 required the following health warning, prescribed by congress, to be placed on all cigarette packages sold in the United States:

**CAUTION: CIGARETTE SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.**

Later warnings would go on to say that smoking causes lung cancer and heart disease and yet the cigarette companies were not as concerned with deadly warning labels on their product as they were with the tax hikes. Internal documents, disclosed in the tobacco lawsuits, show that the tobacco companies were well aware that raising cigarette prices is one of the most effective ways to prevent and reduce smoking, especially among kids. Here are a few examples of what the tobacco companies thought about taxing cigarettes.

\* Philip Morris: Of all the concerns, there is one - taxation - that alarms us the most. While marketing restrictions and public and passive smoking [restrictions] do depress volume, in our experience taxation depresses it much more severely. Our concern for taxation is, therefore, central to our thinking.

\* Philip Morris: When the tax goes up, industry loses volume and profits as many smokers cut back.

\* RJ Reynolds: If prices were 10% higher, 12-17 incidence [youth smoking] would be 11.9% lower.

\* Philip Morris: Jeffrey Harris of MIT calculated...that the 1982-83 round of price increases caused two million adults to quit smoking and prevented 600,000 teenagers from starting to smoke...We don’t need to have that happen again.

\* Philip Morris: A high cigarette price, more than any other cigarette attribute, has the most dramatic impact on the share of the quitting population...price, not tar level, is the main driving force for quitting.

Even the government knows that raising taxes on cigarettes is the most effective way to reduce the number of smokers:

The 2000 U.S. Surgeon General's Report, reducing tobacco use, found that raising tobacco-product prices decreases the prevalence of tobacco use, particularly among kids and young adults, and that tobacco tax increases produce "substantial long-term improvements in health." From its review of existing research, the report concluded that raising tobacco taxes is one of the most effective tobacco prevention and control strategies.

The government also knows warning labels have little effect on changing people's behaviors and yet in 2010 the legislation provided \$500 million for prevention and wellness grants, an amount that increases to \$15 billion during the next 10 years. One of the most important provisions in the law is buried deep within the legislation itself. That provision requires any restaurant with 20 or more locations to include calorie counts on individual menus, menu boards and drive-through menus. The provision, which took effect in 2011, also will apply to foods sold in vending machines, including foods that do not have calorie listings on the front of the package. The result: People who ate at McDonalds saved 11 calories due to calorie count on menus.

Adding a calorie count label on food and beverages or menus does nothing to change the poor eating behaviors of children and adults. Our government throws millions of dollars at a problem that can be fixed for free. The childhood obesity epidemic in the United States is serious. However, the solution is very simple:

1. Add a 1 hour daily fitness class to all schools K-8.
2. Add a sugar tax. Increasing the cost of sugary beverages and food will decrease the consumption of unhealthy food. Furthermore, use the sugar tax revenue to subsidize healthy food.
3. Make sure every child gets 2 hours of after school physical activity.
4. Reduce daily caloric intake\*

\* Several things come into play when trying to determine how many calories your child needs everyday such as age,sex,and activity level. You don't need to count every calorie your child consumes every day. However, the two links below give parents a general idea of the total calories your child should be taking in everyday. These tools come in handy especially if your child is very active,but still putting on weight.

[How many calories do kids need?](#)

[Children's energy needs calculator](#)

# Contact Information

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