

Exploratory Research: Update of Perspectives on Children's Health and Fitness

Prepared for

**International Food
Information Council**

February 2005

Van Patten Research

Background

- ◆ In response to the rising rate of childhood obesity, qualitative research was conducted in 2000.
- ◆ Current study was undertaken to determine what, if anything, has changed since 2000 with respect to children's and parents' attitudes and behaviors towards children's health and fitness.

Van Patten Research

2

Research Objectives

- ◆ To explore how children ages 9-12 and their parents think and feel about health, fitness, nutrition and physical activity.
- ◆ To identify the messages and support mechanisms that may be most effective in
 - Communicating the benefits of healthy lifestyles
 - Motivating them to begin the process of changing existing behaviors

Methodology

- ◆ Eight focus groups in January 2005
- ◆ Baltimore and Chicago
- ◆ Four groups per market
 - Four 2-hour groups with parents of children ages 9-12
 - Four 90-minute groups with children aged 9-12

Research Caveat

- ◆ **This qualitative research method was designed to gain insight and understanding, using a small, non-random sample of consumers. The findings are not projectable to a larger population.**

Overview of Findings

Modest progress since 2000

- ◆ Some isolated changes were noted versus the 2000 study.
- ◆ However, key changes are mostly in terms of awareness of issues, rather than behavior.
 - Some parents now perceive childhood obesity as a health concern.
 - Some parents and kids are more aware of the long-term importance of a healthy lifestyle, nutrition and activity for kids.

Changing behavior is the challenge

- ◆ While awareness is increasing, both parents and children find it hard to change behavior. Behavioral changes been few, or sporadic and inconsistent.
- ◆ As in 2000, parents are still frustrated and need help to address their children's weight and promote healthier lifestyles.
- ◆ Successful programs must involve the entire family, with parents serving as role models and working together with kids.

Children's Perspectives on Health, Fitness, Nutrition and Physical Activity

Van Patten Research

Pastimes are important to kids

- ◆ Favorite pastimes for many kids are sedentary
 - Playing videogames and computer games
 - Watching TV
 - Listening to music
 - Sleeping
 - Eating

Van Patten Research

10

Pastimes are important to kids (Cont.)

- ◆ Favorite pastimes for other kids are active
 - Organized sports for some boys and girls
 - Informal, spontaneous activity
 - ◆ Bike riding
 - ◆ Skateboarding
 - ◆ Walking the dog
 - ◆ Running with mom
 - ◆ Playing outside with friends

Active and sedentary pastimes

I like videogames more than playing sports because I'm lazy and I don't like to do that much. (Older boy)

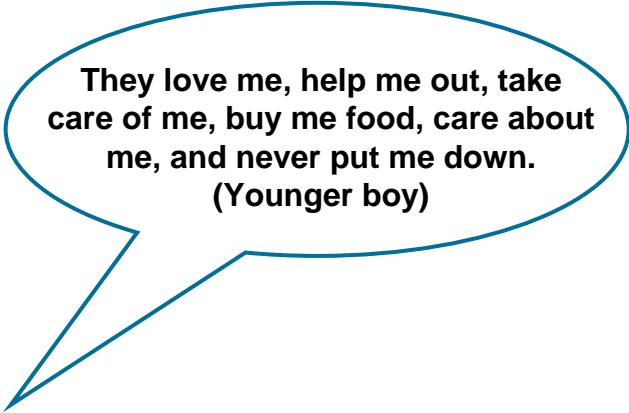
It's fun. (Younger girl)

I feel good when I win. I feel like I've accomplished something. (Older girl)

Family is important to kids, too

- ◆ Older family members (mom, dad, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles)
 - Can be role models for kids
 - Are often the people kids admire most

Family is very important to kids



They love me, help me out, take care of me, buy me food, care about me, and never put me down.
(Younger boy)

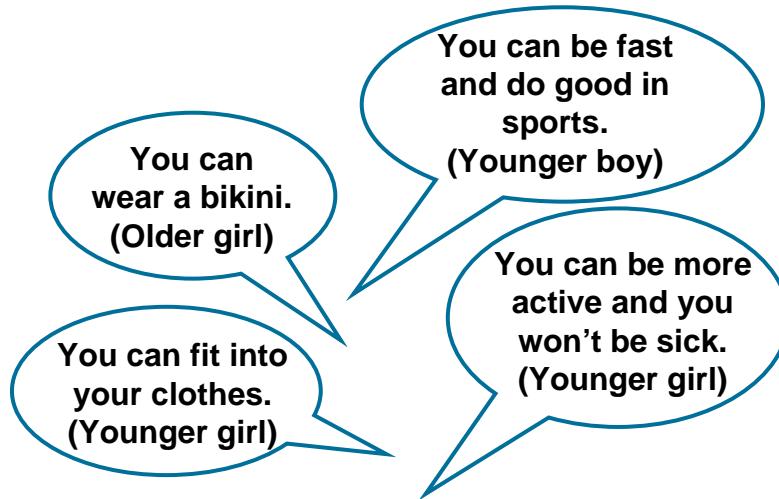
Friends and pets also play a role

- ◆ **Kids often spend more time with friends than with family**
 - **Especially older kids**
 - **Friends can influence positively or negatively**
- ◆ **Pets can help motivate kids to be active**

Health is also important to kids

- ◆ **A few kids include “health” unprompted in their list of “important” things in their lives**
- ◆ **All kids (when asked) agree it’s important to be healthy**
- ◆ **Most kids associate only near-term, “instant gratification” benefits with being healthy**

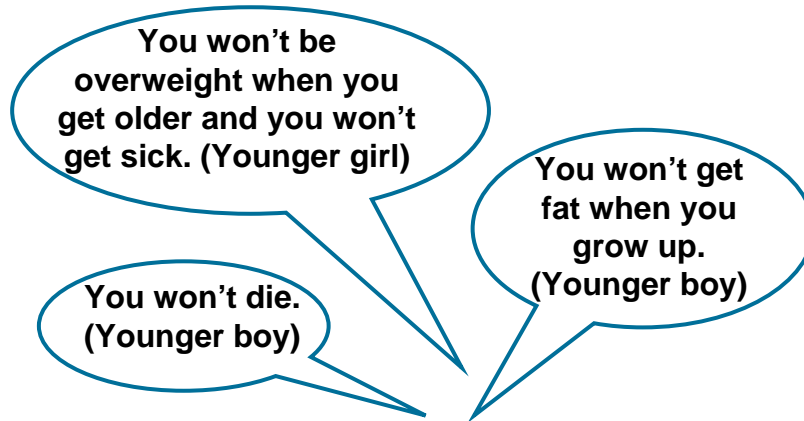
Kids see short-term health benefits



Some kids also see future benefits

- ◆ A few kids are aware that being healthy has implications for their future quality of life
 - Long-term health benefits
 - Avoiding obesity
 - Prolonging life

Some kids see long term benefits



Some are aware of the role of activity

- ◆ Many kids associate being healthy with food-related “rules”
 - Eat the right foods
 - Avoid junk food
 - Drink water
- ◆ Some kids make the direct connection between health and exercise/activity
 - For some, “being healthy” is more than just what they eat (or don't eat)

Some aware of activity and food

I'm healthy because I drink a lot of water, don't drink much soda, eat better food, and I get exercise.

(Younger girl)

To be healthier I'd eat salad once a day and jog daily. (Younger girl)

Being healthy is eating healthy and exercising, and getting more fresh air.

(Older boy)

Many kids admit they're not healthy

- ◆ Frequently relate this to their eating habits
 - Not following the “food rules”
- ◆ Some give lack of exercise as the primary reason
 - Not getting enough exercise

Kids know why they aren't healthy

I eat lots of junk food and dessert and drink soda.
(Older boy)

My mom won't let me go on a diet because I'm too young. (Older girl)

If you want to be healthy, you should get more exercise.
(Older boy)

You need enough exercise to be healthy.
(Younger girl)

Negative short-term implications

- ◆ Kids understand that being overweight has immediate negative consequences
 - Affects their appearance
 - Impairs performance in sports
 - Lowers self-esteem

Immediate negatives of overweight

I'd be better at soccer and I could practice more and work out. (Younger boy)

I'd feel better because people would give me compliments. (Older girl)

I could run faster. (Younger girl)

I would feel more athletic and I'd be proud of myself if I played better. (Older boy)

Kids called me names like Fat Albert, so I lost some weight. (Older boy)

Van Patten Research

25

A few kids relate weight and health

- ◆ Some kids are concerned about their weight for health-related reasons
 - Make the connection between obesity and health
 - Seeing health problems in their own families makes it “real” to kids
 - ◆ Overweight family members with diabetes or heart problems

Van Patten Research

26

Some kids connect weight & health

It's not good for your heart if you're too big. You can have a heart attack. (Older boy)

If I lost weight, I'd be healthier. (Younger boy)

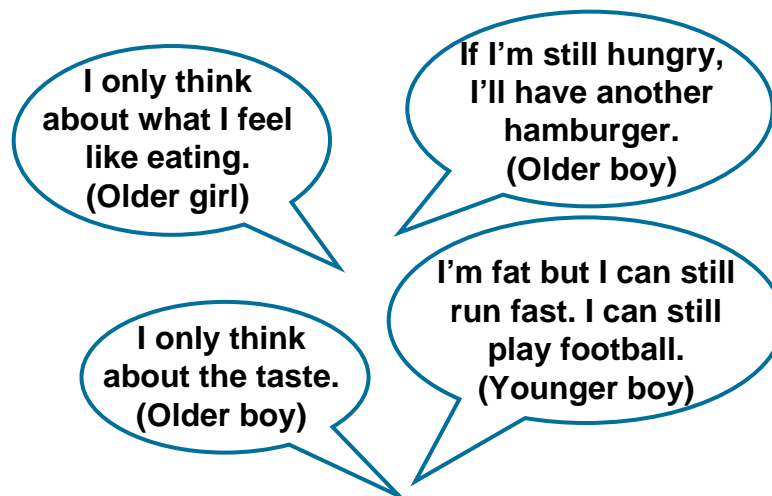
Kids are aware of barriers

- ◆ Both external and internal
- ◆ No role models
 - Friends and parents eat snacks and junk food
 - Less healthy choices are readily available at school (pizza, chips, fries)
- ◆ TV commercials promote “unhealthy” foods

Kids are aware of barriers (Cont.)

- ◆ Don't see a personal need
- ◆ Belief that "healthy" foods don't taste good
- ◆ Don't think about eating healthy when choosing foods

Multiple barriers to healthy eating



Kids know activity is important

- ◆ They think that getting exercise will help them
 - Be healthy
 - Lose weight, control weight
 - Be more athletic, run faster, play better
 - Have more muscles
 - Look more attractive
 - Have more energy
 - Feel better about self

Kids know activity is healthy

Being active gives you energy and gets rid of stress and clears your head.
(Younger girl)

I'd look different.
I'd have muscles.
(Older boy)

Some kids admit they aren't active

- ◆ Think they don't get enough exercise
- ◆ Barriers are both external and internal
 - School and homework
 - Organized sports aren't available, or aren't year-round
 - Gym class is short and not every day
 - Fitness centers don't allow kids to work out
 - No one else in the family exercises

Some barriers are internal

- ◆ Prefer sedentary activities like videogames
- ◆ "Exercise" has negative associations
 - Seems like work
 - Not fun
- ◆ No instant gratification or quick results from exercise

Multiple barriers to activity

It takes too long and sometimes it hurts if you do too much. (Younger girl)

I like to stay inside when it's cold. (Older boy)

It's frustrating if you don't make any progress and don't lose weight. (Older girl)

“Being fit” is important to kids, but

- ◆ “Fitness” is a confusing concept to some
- ◆ “Fitness” has both internal and external components for kids
 - Eating healthy, watching what you eat
 - Being in shape, having muscles, being athletic
 - Having energy and doing physical activity without getting tired

Kids' reasons for "being fit"

- ◆ Won't get fat
- ◆ Won't be sick
- ◆ Do well in sports
- ◆ Wear nice clothes
- ◆ Impress others
- ◆ Feel better about yourself

Kids find it hard to change

- ◆ Kids' "rules" for being healthy are mostly food-related
 - Follow the food pyramid
 - Eat more vegetables, fruits, and salads
 - Eat low-fat food
 - Eat less meat
 - Drink more water and less soda
 - Exercise more

Exercise is especially challenging

- ◆ Exercise-related strategies for being healthy seem harder for kids
 - Exercise is work
 - It's boring, not fun
 - Opportunities for exercise are limited or not available

Hard for kids to increase activity

Exercise is working out.
Exercise is being alone.
Playing sports is having fun. (Younger girl)

We're not used to exercising. (Younger girl)

Kids want easier access to activity

- ◆ Suggest sports and fitness centers “just for kids”
 - Feature a variety of fun activities
 - ◆ Playing sports
 - ◆ Using exercise machines
 - ◆ Swimming
 - ◆ Walking
 - ◆ Running
 - ◆ Dancing

Fitness centers “just for kids” (Cont.)

- ◆ Offer programs and activities for different levels of physical ability
- ◆ Provide counselors to encourage kids
- ◆ Offer healthy foods and snacks
- ◆ Give kids tips for what to do at home

Changes among Kids since the 2000 Study

Van Patten Research

Changes since the 2000 study

- ◆ Kids' changes are subtle
 - Changes are more in attitudes than behavior
 - Changes are evident among a few kids, not among all kids
- ◆ More kids now are aware of the importance of “health” and/or “exercise”

Van Patten Research

44

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ **“Health” is becoming more important to some kids**
 - **A few kids now add “health” unprompted to the list of “important” things in their lives**
 - **Some kids are now aware that being healthy has implications for their future quality of life**

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ **Some kids are now concerned about their weight for health-related reasons**
 - **A few kids are starting to make the connection between obesity and health**

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ Stronger association now for some kids between health and exercise/activity
 - For some, “being healthy” is more than just what they eat (or don’t eat)
- ◆ Some say lack of exercise is the primary reason for not being healthy

Parents’ Perspectives on Health, Fitness, Nutrition and Physical Activity

Child's weight is a concern

- ◆ **Some see child's weight as a health issue, not just a self-esteem issue**
- ◆ **Consider child's weight a health issue because**
 - **Difficulty breathing during exercise**
 - **Asthma seems to be worse**
 - **Family history of diabetes**
 - **News reports and articles suggest links between child obesity and health problems**

Doctors are warning parents

- ◆ **Child is overweight**
- ◆ **Overweight kids are at risk of developing diabetes**
- ◆ **Overweight older siblings have high triglycerides or high cholesterol**
- ◆ **BMI test showed that son's "muscle" is really "fat"**

Some parents aware of health issues



I didn't know kids could have these kinds of problems.

Concerned about child's self-esteem

- ◆ **Overweight is a self-esteem issue because**
 - **Child wants to look like other kids**
 - **Child wants to wear fashionable clothes; hates wearing “plus” sizes**
 - **Child wants to do better in sports**
 - **Other kids tease their child**

See overweight as self-esteem issue

My daughter runs slower than most kids on the basketball court.

My son doesn't like the fat jokes.

My daughter can't wear cute clothes because her belly sticks out.

My daughter hates the Pretty Plus clothes because it's 'chubby girl' clothes.

Food and exercise affect health

- ◆ Some parents are aware that children's health is related to both food and exercise
- ◆ But many are frustrated; don't know how to motivate their kids
 - Kids don't care about their health and weight
 - Kids aren't motivated to change their behavior
 - Relatively few kids are motivated and are making changes

Parents are frustrated

Being overweight hasn't stopped him from doing anything he wants.

She doesn't want to look like her parents but she's not doing anything about it.

My kids don't even think about their health.

My kids are concerned because of playing sports. They want to do well.

She doesn't eat junk food because she wants to look pretty like Beyonce.

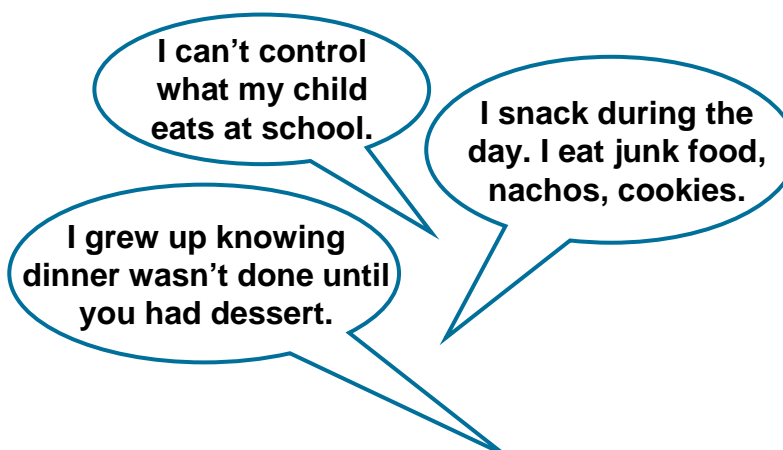
Barriers to kids' healthier eating

- ◆ Parents don't believe kids make healthy food choices, especially
 - When unsupervised at home
 - When away from home
- ◆ Children make their own food decisions for
 - Breakfast
 - Lunch
 - Snacks
 - Sometimes dinner

Barriers to kids' healthier eating (Cont.)

- ◆ Parents aren't good role models
- ◆ Parents often rely on convenience foods and fast food
 - Hectic, demanding lifestyles
- ◆ Convenience foods/fast foods are cheaper than healthy foods
- ◆ Parents like to indulge their kids
 - Don't like to deny them if they want something

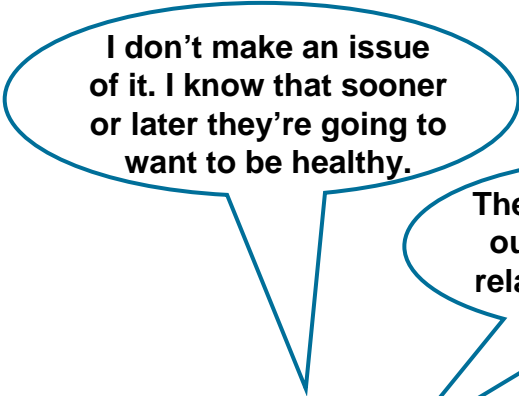
Parents are often poor role models



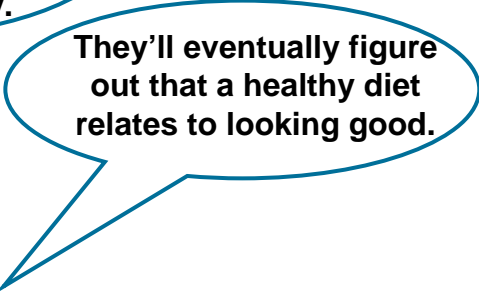
Barriers to kids' healthier eating (Cont.)

- ◆ **Some kids overeat**
- ◆ **Parents aren't sure how to talk to child about weight loss**
 - **Don't want to hurt child's self-esteem**
 - **Don't want to focus on overweight because of fear it could lead to eating disorders**
- ◆ **Some parents assume kids will become concerned about it when they get older**

Parents reluctant to raise the issue



I don't make an issue of it. I know that sooner or later they're going to want to be healthy.



They'll eventually figure out that a healthy diet relates to looking good.

Some parents trying to change

- ◆ Encouraging healthier eating
 - But they need more ideas and help in being consistent
- ◆ A few kids are talking to their parents about healthier eating
 - Learn about the Food Pyramid in school and tell parents what's missing at dinner
 - Watch the Food Channel and tell mom about healthy eating tips

Parents' strategies

- ◆ Encourage fruit as a snack or dessert
- ◆ Buy water in sports bottles to encourage child to drink water
- ◆ Grill food instead of fry
- ◆ Make healthier substitutions in recipes
- ◆ Serve “balanced” meals at dinner
- ◆ Disguise vegetables
- ◆ Limit the number of fast food nights per week
- ◆ Talk to their kids about food choices
- ◆ Encourage moderation in eating
- ◆ Lose weight themselves

Barriers to kids' being active

- ◆ **Some parents believe their kids do not get enough exercise and are not fit**
 - Kids aren't into sports or being active
 - Favorite pastimes are sedentary
 - Exercising isn't "cool"
 - Parents are poor role models
 - ◆ Too busy
 - ◆ Dislike exercise

Barriers to kids' being active (Cont.)

- ◆ **Kids get discouraged**
 - Exercise is hard, since they're not fit
 - Dislike the discipline of practice
- ◆ **Few opportunities exist**
 - Gym classes are being reduced
 - No accessible organized sports or sports facilities
 - Drive everywhere instead of walking
 - Harder to be outdoors in cold weather

Multiple barriers to activity

If they're sitting in front of the TV or PlayStation all day, you know they're not fit.

I'm working two jobs, and my wife works too.

The public park has a "No ball playing" sign on the field.

Walking isn't cool. He'll walk to the store to get some chips, but he won't just take a walk.

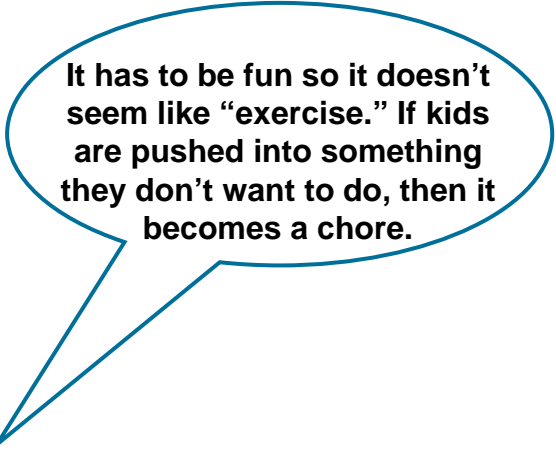
Some parents encourage activity

- ◆ Want to help kids be more active
 - But they need more suggestions and help
- ◆ Walk to school with kids instead of drive
- ◆ Make exercise fun
 - Walk the dog
 - Walk in the mall
 - Walk in the nature preserve
 - Put on music and dance at home

Some encourage activity (Cont.)

- ◆ Family activities
 - Join the Y and swim together
 - Coach kids' sports team
- ◆ Limit videogames and TV during the week
- ◆ Reward kids for being active
 - Allowance for walking the dog

Parents need help motivating kids



It has to be fun so it doesn't seem like "exercise." If kids are pushed into something they don't want to do, then it becomes a chore.

Some parents are aware of issues

- ◆ More kids are obese than ever before
- ◆ More kids are developing diseases or medical conditions as a result
- ◆ Obesity may cause more deaths than smoking
- ◆ Hearing messages about good nutrition
 - Choose low carbs, low fat, antioxidants
 - Avoid trans fats and too much sodium

Sources of messages

- ◆ Media, TV & magazines
 - Food Channel, medical channels, news programs and features
 - Health and fitness, women's, teen
- ◆ Doctors/pediatricians
 - Screenings for kids to check
 - ◆ Cholesterol
 - ◆ Blood pressure
 - ◆ Body mass index

Sources of messages (Cont.)

- ◆ **Sports coaches, exercise instructors**
- ◆ **Their own kids**
 - **School projects on food and nutrition**
 - **Learn about the food pyramid at school and on Nickelodeon**
 - **Ask about the Olsen twin's anorexia**

Parents' suggestions

- ◆ **Focus on both parents and kids**
- ◆ **Parent-oriented programs to help parents be better role models**
 - **Information about diseases related to childhood obesity**
 - **Medical screenings to identify children at risk, with suggestions for how to prevent health problems**
 - **Nutritional information on healthier eating and meal preparation**

Parents' suggestions (Cont.)

- ◆ **Kid-oriented programs to help kids be more active**
 - **Positive orientation**
 - **Rewards for being active and making healthier choices**
 - **After school programs that encourage kids to be active**
 - **Fitness centers with areas just for kids**

Parents' suggestions (Cont.)

- ◆ **Family programs to get everyone involved and make it fun**
 - **Family fitness night at McDonalds with "Healthy Meals"**
 - **Reduced prices for family memberships at YMCA and fitness centers**
 - **Family fitness nights at fitness centers**

Changes among Parents since the 2000 Study

Van Patten Research

Changes since the 2000 study

- ◆ Parents' changes since 2000 are subtle
- ◆ Changes are in attitudes primarily, but also in behavior in some instances
- ◆ More parents are concerned about child's weight and implications for health
- ◆ More are concerned about how both poor eating habits **and** lack of exercise affect child's weight and health

Van Patten Research

76

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ **Some parents now see child's weight as a health issue, not just a self-esteem issue**
 - **More awareness of news reports and articles that suggest links between child obesity and health problems**
 - **Doctors now are warning parents of health risks related to child's weight**

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ **Growing awareness of specific issues related to weight and health**
 - **More kids are obese than ever before**
 - **More kids are developing diseases or medical conditions as a result**
 - **Obesity may cause more deaths than smoking**

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ **Some parents are now aware that children's health is related to both food and exercise**
- ◆ **Some parents are trying to encourage healthier eating**
- ◆ **A few kids are now talking to their parents about healthier eating**

Changes since the 2000 study (Cont.)

- ◆ **Some parents believe their kids do not get enough exercise and are not fit**
- ◆ **Some parents are now encouraging activity**
 - **Want to help child be more active**
 - **Notice more success when they're active as a family**

Implications for Messages and Support Mechanisms

Van Patten Research

Parents trying, but they need help

- ◆ **Parents know it's their responsibility to encourage a healthier lifestyle for their kids**
- ◆ **But, it's hard to do**
 - **Realities of tweens' increasing independence**
 - **Demands of daily life**
 - **Today's convenience-oriented lifestyles**

Van Patten Research

82

Parents know they need help

It's all common sense
but it's just executing it
and doing it.

If I don't cook healthy,
my kids won't eat
healthy.

We as parents are
responsible for bringing
unhealthy foods into our
house.

Parents need to
realize that we're
role models for
eating healthy and
exercising.

Focus on the whole family

- ◆ For success, messages and programs must include the family, not just parents or kids
- ◆ Meaningful behavioral changes occur when parents and kids are “in it together”
 - Kids model parents' behavior regarding food choices and activity
 - Kids value opportunity to spend more time and do things with parents
 - Kids respond to encouragement from their parents

Focus on the whole family (Cont.)

- ◆ **Help parents and kids**
 - **Define and measure kids' health and fitness**
 - **Set realistic goals**
 - **Develop “personalized” programs for kids**
 - **Track and reward kids' progress**

Focus on the whole family (Cont.)

- ◆ **Focus on “activity” not “exercise”**
 - **Make it seem like fun, not work**
- ◆ **Give parents and kids simple tips for**
 - **Ways to be more active in their everyday lives**
 - **Making healthier food choices both at home and away from home**

Use appropriate tonality

- ◆ **For kids, keep the tone light**
 - **Avoid scare tactics**
 - **Avoid negative messages**
- ◆ **For parents, the tone should be serious**
 - **But not threatening or critical**