

NYC Task Force For Quality Inclusive Schooling
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Understanding Childhood Obesity and Its Impact on Learning and Behavior

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Presenter’s Background:

Professor Phillips graduated with an MA in Health Psychology. He has worked as a counselor for adults and children with bariatric disorders and psychosocial disorders for over twenty years. During that time, he focused his intervention on disorders that could be mediated (e.g. obesity, HIV). Currently he directs activities of the Children’s Health Education Foundation, which he developed three years ago. In the interim, he worked for the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society.

The Children’s Health Education Foundation is a public health and academic venue. The organization recruits counselors to work with children who face the challenge

of obesity. The organization stresses the negative effects of dieting for children while simultaneously working on mediating the bio-psychosocial challenges they face. The counselors are students who have completed a BS in pre-med. They work for one year as mentors in a school setting. They receive pre-service training and a \$25,000 stipend.

Workshop Objectives:

- To inform attendees about the biological and psychological components of obesity.
- To increase awareness of the social occlusion that children with obesity often face.
- To instruct professionals involved with children to teach their students about nutrition and the importance of healthy food choices.
- To stress the fact that each person is made differently and that obesity is not necessarily a result of laziness or lack of self-care.

Topical Outline:

- The biological processes of obesity.
- Children and obesity.
- Social implications of childhood obesity.
- Effects of dieting.
- Cognitive-behavioral approaches to eating.

Content of session:

Professor Phillips began the session by explaining the scientific angle of the bio-psychosocial model. He mentioned that an individual's resting metabolic rate (RMR) is the amount of energy that a person burns during periods of inactivity. This rate varies

across height, weight and gender. Sometimes, individuals who eat less amounts of food have lower energy levels than those who have eaten more. Many people have different metabolic rates, which are unrelated to the nutrients they consume.

When this is done in a classroom setting, the children recognize that everyone's body is different, which helps to promote a message of non-discrimination. This emphasizes the fact that weight/calorie burning is very connected to genetics and not necessarily something the child can control. In addition, the students are mostly sedentary during the day, which increases their chances of developing obesity.

In order to illustrate the widespread and deep-rooted effects of obesity, Professor Phillips shared elements of a research project. During the 1950's, a study was conducted which asked children to rank, from a group of photos, the child they would most enjoy playing with. Children from various ethnic and racial backgrounds participated in the study. With the exception of the participants with cognitive delays, the remaining children selected the children with obesity as a last resort. According to Phillips, children who face the challenge of obesity live lives of quiet desperation, they are targeted and picked on by their classmates and sometimes even the adults in their lives.

Professor Phillips broke down the elements of the dieting cycle in order to assist the audience in understanding the negative effects that this can have on a child. The cycle involves the restriction of fattening foods, followed by a bingeing period, feelings of guilt and finally, continued bingeing since the individual has already indulged. He shared a vignette from his childhood where he described his own battle with consuming high-caloric foods and the negative consequences he experienced as a result. During a late night excursion to the kitchen, Professor Phillips found a half-eaten cake in the

refrigerator. He started with one slice, followed it with another, and before he knew it, he had consumed the entire cake. He described his immense feelings of guilt and his resolve to avoid those foods in the future. However, he related that the key to establishing appropriate eating habits is to encourage choice and be sure not to rule out fattening foods completely, as that will only backfire and induce a binging period.

This concept can be illustrated by utilizing cognitive and behavioral aspects to teach a child the methods of eating a balanced and healthy diet. By looking at the amount of calories they can consume on a daily basis, children can be educated to make healthy choices when selecting foods. He concluded by saying the parents may, at times be the obstacles to their children's healthy eating.

Professor Phillips is determined to provide training to parents, teachers and health professionals to highlight the dangers of dieting. Currently, the Health Corps Organization is active in four states, and Phillips is working to expand that network. Furthermore, as a professor, Phillips integrates bariatric study material into the child development curriculum. In this way, Professor Phillips is educating the teaching professionals under his tutelage about the challenge of obesity before they work with children in a classroom setting.

When Professor Phillips was a counselor, he met with the mother of a young daughter who restricted her nutritional intake in order to lose weight. Phillips outlined a healthy eating plan while simultaneously providing her with a cognitive-behavioral intervention plan to assist her with the lifestyle change. She did not stick to the intervention plan and gained back much of the weight she had lost. Phillips also worked with the daughter to prevent her from forming dysfunctional eating habits. They lost

contact. Several years later, Phillips visited the mother and daughter and discovered that the daughter had developed emotional-behavioral issues. These issues may have been a result of her obesity and the social prejudices she suffered on account of her appearance. Professor Phillips emphasized that it is not possible to differentiate between the biological, psychological and social effects that result from obesity. Therefore, individuals working with children must be educated about the harmful effects of the dieting syndrome.

Relevance to Inclusion:

As inclusion classrooms become more of a reality, it is vital that schools and healthcare professionals come to understand that pediatric obesity is something that can be addressed in the classroom setting. Teachers can illustrate that children have varying metabolic rates and instruct them about making choices about the foods they eat. Aside from installing preventive measures early on, these lessons will work to eliminate prejudice and discrimination both inside and outside of the classroom.

The study that proved that children with obesity will be regarded as social outcasts is a strong proof that this issue is as important, if not more so, than the issue of teaching children to embrace their peers who have visible, physical handicaps. When children are taught to embrace individuals who are different from them, they learn tolerance and acceptance at a very young age, which decreases the likelihood that they will engage in discrimination and prejudice as adults.