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The Georgia Association of Physician Assistants (GAPA) wants to help parents encourage their children to develop a more active lifestyle after being stuck inside during harsh winter months. Radio PSAs on this and other health watch topics are available at gapa.net. Click on the Press tab.

Online PR News "23-February-2011" (Atlanta, GA) As Georgians begin the transition from winter into spring, this is also a good time for parents to think about their children and their overall health status. The Georgia Association of Physician Assistants (GAPA) wants to help parents encourage their children to develop a more active lifestyle after being stuck inside during harsh winter months. No matter the season, some kids routinely spend very little time exercising and more time in front of the TV and computer. On top of that, parents find fewer free moments to prepare nutritious, home-cooked meals, and often rely on fat-filled fast food choices. Obesity also runs in families, with children of obese parents at greater risk of developing weight issues than those with thin parents. These problems are especially challenging because parents provide both genes and environment for their children.

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During the past 20 years there has been a dramatic increase in childhood obesity in the United States. According to the American Obesity Association, 32 percent of all U.S. kids are now overweight, 70 percent of obese adolescents are still obese when they mature, and the number of obese children is continuing to grow at an alarming rate. In addition, obese kids have a higher risk of developing serious illnesses like heart disease, type II diabetes, and asthma. Obesity not only affects a child's physical health, but can also damage them psychologically. Overweight kids are more likely to get bullied, which may lead to depression and more overeating as they cope with their feelings.

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The development of eating behaviors is said to be an extremely complex process influenced by social, cultural, and personal factors. From a developmental perspective, societal influence increases as the child ages. So, parents should teach their children about healthy eating habits long before they are exposed to a world of fast food, junk food, and empty calories. Instead of waiting for a child to develop unhealthy eating habits and then trying to undo the damage, parents should use their powerful influence to shape the way kids think and feel about food choices.

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Most parents know, it is not easy to persuade a child to give up a candy bar in exchange for an apple. So, the key to establishing a pattern of lifelong good health starts with paying attention to a child's diet early on. Healthy eating contributes to a child's overall healthy growth and development, including healthy bones, skin, and energy levels. It also promotes a lowered risk of dental caries, eating disorders, constipation, malnutrition, and iron deficiency anemia. But, because children often grow to rank their parents' opinion on food with their views on curfews, popular music and hairstyles, parents must learn to be clever in introducing nutritious foods into the family menu while maintaining a firm stance when it comes to healthy eating habits.

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In general, a healthy diet is one that affords balanced nutrition and includes these actions:

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- Make smart choices from every food group
- Find your balance between food and physical activity
- Get the most nutrition out of your calories

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The physician assistant members of GAPA strive to help parents foster healthy eating and lifestyle habits for their children, and have provided these important tips:

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Be a positive example: Because kids like to imitate their parents, the best move you can make to start your child off on the right dietary path is to be a role model, so that when your youngster asks to taste what you're eating, your plate is filled with healthy selections. If you're asking your child to eat vegetables and fish while you graze on potato chips, bonbons, and soda, your actions will override your good intentions. When your child is confused about what to do, they will probably do as you do, and not as you say. So lead by example and always eat a healthy meal at dinnertime.

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Exercise portion control and let them choose. Don't make mealtimes a battleground by insisting children clean their plates, and never use food as a reward or bribe. Instead, start them off with very small amounts of food so that nothing goes to waste when they get full. If your child is hungry and asks for more, offer vegetables or a piece of fruit rather than more meat or bread. Parents should follow this same rule in order to set a good example. Food can be used as a reward, a way to exert control, or a way to rebel. Rewarding kids for good grades or good behavior with sweets can set up internal conflicts about food. This is especially true if the rewards are in opposition to current goals for health or body image. If not dealt with early, these behaviors may extend into adult life as well.

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Have regular family meals. Try to serve your meals around the same time daily. This provides a comfortable environment for the entire family, enhances appetite, as kids will usually play until they are called for dinner, and provides a perfect opportunity for your children to share what's going on in their life and school. It is also well known that kids who eat breakfast tend to do better in school.

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Cook more meals at home. Cooking at home helps you appreciate and enjoy your food more, especially if

you share the process with your family. It is also healthier for the whole family and sets a great example for kids about the importance of food. Restaurant meals tend to have more fat, sugar, salt, and highly processed foods. This is also an easy way to shift more of your monetary resources toward whole food and potentially save money. Save dining out for special occasions.

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Get your kids involved. Kids love going to the grocery store. Let them help select what goes in their lunch box, and assist in planning meals you cook at home. Talk about what to buy in terms of healthy meals and snacks, and let them be responsible for a portion of the shopping list. Encourage them to look for coupons and flyers for sales of healthy foods. This is also a chance for you to teach them about the nutritional values of different foods, and for older children to learn to read food labels.

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Make a variety of healthy foods available and keep your pantry free of empty calorie snacks. There are two notorious empty calorie culprits:

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- o Things with lots of sugar and other caloric sweeteners. Examples: soda and sweetened drinks, cakes, cookies, pastries, pies, candy and chocolate bars, frozen milk desserts, snack cakes, and cereal bars.
- o Things with lots of added fats and oil. Examples: mayonnaise, chips, microwave popping corn, crackers, cookies, pies and pastries, packaged muffins, snack cakes, and mixes.

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You can offset what's already in your cabinet by stocking up on great-tasting, more-healthy alternatives for foods you know you and your children will like. For example, there are some reduced-fat chip options that taste terrific. Keep plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grain snacks and healthy beverages (filtered water, milk, herbal tea, occasional fruit juice) around and easily accessible so kids become used to reaching for healthy snacks when they're hungry instead of empty calorie snacks like soda, chips, or cookies.

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Know what kids need to consume to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Different age groups have different nutritional needs, and as such, their diets should meet those specific needs. For example, an infant needs a different diet and nutrition than a teenager. One day a child may eat ravenously, the next day he may eat hardly anything. This is normal for children and adults. Every body's intake of calories varies drastically from day to day. It will all balance out in the end. This is important to keep in mind when following the guidelines below (obtained from Kidshealth.org):

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Grains - These are measured in ounce equivalents, which are just another way of showing a serving size. Here are ounce equivalents for common grain foods. An ounce equivalent equals:

- 1 slice of bread
- cup of cooked cereal, like oatmeal
- cup of rice or pasta
- 1 cup of cold cereal

4- to 8-year-olds need 4-5 ounce equivalents each day. 9- to 13-year-old girls need 5 ounce equivalents each day. 9- to 13-year-old boys need 6 ounce equivalents each day.

Try to make at least half of the grain servings whole grains, such as 100% whole-wheat bread, brown rice,

and oatmeal.

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o Vegetables. Kids need their vegetables, especially those dark green and orange ones. But how much is enough? Vegetable servings are measured in cups. 4- to 8-year-olds need 1 cups of veggies each day. 9- to 13-year-old girls need 2 cups of veggies each day. 9- to 13-year-old boys need 2 cups of veggies each day.

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o Fruits - Sweet, juicy fruit is definitely part of a healthy diet. 4- to 8-year-olds need 1-1 cups of fruit each day. 9- to 13-year-olds need 1 cups of fruit each day.

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o Milk and Other Calcium-Rich Foods - Calcium builds strong bones to last a lifetime, so you need these foods in your child's diet. 4- to 8-year-olds need 2 cups of milk (or another calcium-rich food) each day. 9- to 13-year-olds need 3 cups of milk (or another calcium-rich food) each day. Milk substitutes include yogurt, cheese, or calcium-fortified orange.

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o Meats, Beans, Fish, and Nuts -These foods contain iron and lots of other important nutrients. Like grains, these foods are measured in ounce equivalents. An ounce equivalent of this group would be:

1 ounce of meat, poultry, or fish

cup cooked dry beans

1 egg

1 tablespoon of peanut butter

ounce (about a small handful) of nuts or seeds

4- to 8-year-olds need 3-4 ounce equivalents each day. 9- to 13-year-olds need 5 ounce equivalents each day.

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It is never too early to begin teaching your children how to live a healthy life through proper eating habits. The ease with which kids transition into and stick with a healthy dietary pattern can be positively influenced by a variety of factors. Family support, in terms of providing healthy foods and setting a good example, as well as education about nutrition, are key. If children have convictions about the welfare of animals or reducing the impact on the environment and/or have a clear understanding of the health value of good eating habits, they will be more likely to adopt and maintain good eating habits, particularly as they become adults and move away from home.

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Want more educational programs to learn about diet and nutrition? Here are a few:

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The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and other federal agencies work to help children improve their health diet, nutrition, and a healthy lifestyle play important roles. The NICHD is involved in health education programs that can help people learn about diet and nutrition:

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Media-Smart Youth: Eat, Think, and Be Active! is an interactive after-school education program for young people ages 11 to 13. It is designed to help teach them about the complex media world around them, and how it can affect their health especially in the areas of nutrition and physical activity. Media-Smart Youth is not a weight loss program, but rather is a health promotion program. It helps young people become critical, creative thinkers to help them make smart and positive choices about nutrition and physical activity.

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Milk Matters is an information campaign that educates families about the importance of getting enough calcium, especially for kids and teens ages 11 to 15, a time of critical bone growth. Although the consequences of low calcium consumption may not be visible in childhood, the NICHD recognizes lack of calcium intake as a serious and growing threat to the health of young people later in life.

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WE CAN! (Ways to Enhance Childrens Activity and Nutrition) is a national education program to help prevent overweight and obesity among youth ages eight to 13. WE CAN offers parents and families tips and fun activities to encourage healthy eating, increase physical activity, and reduce sedentary or screen time. It also offers community groups and health professionals exciting resources to implement programs and fun activities for parents and youth in communities around the country.

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The Dietary Guidelines for Americans a report published every five years by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture explains how you can accomplish these dietary actions. The report recommends a general diet that can help lead to good health and reduce risk for diseases for people two years and older.

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The My Pyramid Plan website is an interactive Web site that allows you to get personalized diet plans to help make sure that you and your family are getting the foods and amounts that are right for your age, current weight, and health level.

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The Make Your Calories Count website is an interactive site that explains how to use the information in Nutrition Facts labels on foods to make food choices that provide balanced nutrition.

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When families build a healthy diet from fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes, a healthy body weight naturally follows. It is important to remember that these guidelines are not rules. They are meant to help parents lay the groundwork of proper nutrition and healthy eating habits for their families. Parents who are concerned about their familys nutritional needs should talk with a health care provider who will make recommendations based on their family history and current health status.

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It is the mission of the Georgia Association of Physician Assistants to promote high quality, cost-effective, accessible health care as part of a physician-directed PA/physician team in Georgia. To learn more health tips or how PAs make health care more affordable and accessible in Georgia, please visit www.GAPA.net and click on Patients.

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