

Families Tackle Weighty Issues

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This could be the new normal if the epidemic of childhood obesity isn't resolved.

Across the country Americans have been eating fatter food and living more sedentary lives while piling on pounds. Children have been no exception to this trend. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 5 percent of children ages 12 through 19 were considered obese. By 2006, that number had jumped to 18 percent. Nationally, nearly a third of all children are either overweight or obese.

The U.S. has begun making efforts to address the growing problem. Earlier this month, First Lady Michelle Obama called cities across the country to act on the problem. The Cookie Monster on Sesame Street has begun singing that cookies "are a sometimes food."

But confronting this epidemic, which could have serious health and economic consequences, will require more than rousing kids to be more active. Deep changes in the most basic parts of peoples' could be on the horizon the address the issue.

Research shows that obese children are more likely to become obese adults and face the same health risks, which include diabetes, sleep apnea, high blood pressure, asthma, and lower life expectancy. This trend could have alarming consequences. According to the New England Journal of Medicine, all the health gains the U.S. has made from decreases in smoking will be offset by a rise in obesity.

Oregon has been steadily following this trend. In 2007, 24 percent of Oregon children between 10 and 17 are either overweight or obese. The state already shells out more than \$781 million a year on medical conditions attributable to diabetes, according to the Oregon Department of Human Services.

"We are living in an environment that is not conducive to maintaining a healthy weight," said Martin Binks an assistant consulting professor at Duke Medical Center and member of the Obesity Society.

Experts say that the obesity, childhood and adult, will always be an issue as long as making the unhealthy choice is the easy choice. Places to walk or ride bikes vanished as Americans become dependent on cars. The nation's food supply has also become increasingly awash with a steady supply of cheap and fatty calories.

In 1970, 66 percent of children in the United States walked or biked to school. By 2000, that number was down to 10 percent.

Nationally, physical education programs have been cut from cash-

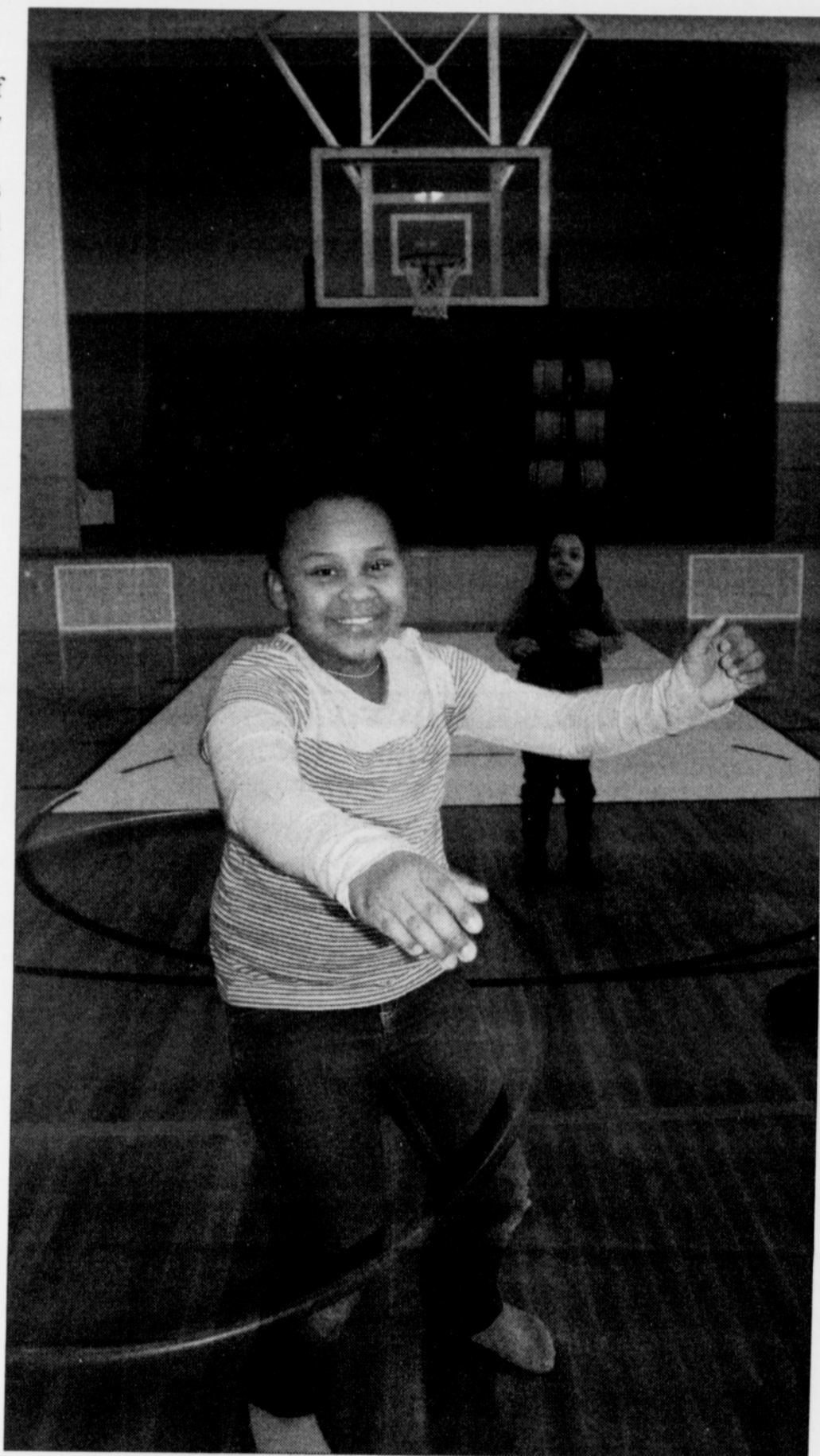


PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Makalia Brooks keep active with hula hoop and other activities in the anti-obesity program Portland Play at the University Park Community center in north Portland.

strapped schools and food served in their cafeterias has become increasingly fried and fatty, said Binks.

Health care experts liken efforts to combat obesity to that of anti-smoking efforts. For decades, health professionals warned of the dangers of tobacco use, but people kept sucking down cancer sticks. It wasn't until "no smoking" and anti-cigarette ads became commonplace that people changed, he said.

"When it comes to helping kids, the focus needs to be a little different," Binks said.

He explained that it's important to get them eating healthy foods at an early age and get routine exercise. Binks also said that there can be some innovative ways to accomplish this, like incorporating physical activity into lessons, as well as the Wii video game system that requires users to move.

Portland has made strides on confronting the environment that fosters obesity. It has actively cultivated walking and biking. Port-

land public schools also banned sugary sodas from its schools, mandated physical education, and tried to bring nutritious food into cafeterias. And Oregon launched a farm-to-school program in 2007 that is bringing more nutritious foods to a handful of schools.

But more needs to be done. Studies show that impoverished families often lack walkable spaces and access to healthy food, and research shows that children in poverty are particularly vulnerable to this ailment.

Noelle Dobson, a program director for the Oregon Public Health Institute, said that big contributors to obesity are "food deserts" that often exist in low-income areas. She explained that some people live miles from a grocery store, and can sometimes only rarely make the trek. As a result, they end up buying unhealthy food that lasts long and is filling.

Her organization recently landed a \$360,000 grant from the Robert

Wood Johnson Foundation to address this issue, and is working to get stakeholders with affordable housing to look at this issue. She hopes that more low-income areas, many in east Portland, will get things like farmers' markets and establish urban agriculture projects so people can get fresh vegetables.

"The bottom line is, we need to make the healthy choice the easy

choice," she said.

Last April, Oregon lawmakers released a report calling being overweight or obese the "new norm" and a public health crisis.

It called on the Legislature to devote more money for physical education in schools and invest \$10 million a year in an anti-obesity education effort.

The legislature funded neither.

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