

# OPINION

## Reversing a Troubling Trend

'Let's Move' against childhood obesity

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

When First Lady Michelle Obama decided to launch the "Let's Move" campaign to fight childhood obesity, she brought much-needed attention to a crisis millions of children face. It's a special concern for children of color, because new research shows black and Latino kids are disproportionately at risk.



But children of color are far from the only ones in danger. Experts estimate that one-third of American children are currently overweight or obese, and these rates have tripled among children ages 12 to 19 since 1980. Some adults may see heavy kids as healthy eaters, or think that for children, extra weight is mainly just a cosmetic issue. But serious risks for overweight children go far beyond appearance.

Diseases once associated only with adults, like Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure, are rising at younger and younger ages.

Overweight children are at greatly increased risk of being overweight adults. For many kids, this may be more than just a "chubby" phase they'll outgrow some day. As many as 80 percent of overweight children may experience a lifetime of increased health risks that come with being overweight.

The most pressing risk, cardiovascular disease, remains the leading killer in America. If childhood obesity trends continue, experts pre-

dict the lifespan of the average child in America could decline by up to five years--making this the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

Our country already spends \$150 billion a year treating obesity-related diseases--nearly 10 percent of all medical spending. Many experts label the current level of childhood obesity an epidemic that threatens our future national health, productivity, and security. Something must be done to stop and reverse this trend.

Childhood obesity is on the rise for many reasons. American children have been immersed in the same "supersized" culture that snares adults, surrounded by high-calorie, high-fat food that's plentiful, cheap, and often served in unrealistically big portions.

And today's children and teenagers are much less likely than past generations to spend free time running around outdoors, and much more likely to spend it on the couch watching TV, playing video games, or surfing the Web, often with snacks and sodas right next to them.

Very few children get the 60 minutes of moderate physical activity the Surgeon General recommends kids have most days of the week.

Even schools have become part of the problem. Many districts have cut back on gym time and recess, often as a tradeoff for more instructional time to prepare for state testing.

The quality of school meals and easy availability of snacks and sugary drinks in many school vending machines were some of the first targets in the war on child obesity, and there's

been progress.

Some major school food suppliers are making improvements in response to Mrs. Obama's campaign. Advocates for better nutrition hope that as more people become aware of the risks to children's health, more industries, schools, restaurants, and communities will make a big difference for America's children.

As these kinds of changes occur in a range of child environments, the First Lady and others stress the biggest influence in children's eating habits will come from home. It has been parents who have told their children to eat their vegetables or go outside and get some fresh air.

Michelle Obama has shared some of the simple changes she and the president have made in their own family's lifestyle, including watching portion sizes, packing more fruits and water in their daughters' lunches, limiting TV time, and famously, starting a vegetable garden at home.

We know our beautiful children come in all shapes and sizes. But by being aware of the serious health risks many overweight children face, and of the long-term value of a balanced diet and regular exercise, we can help make sure all our children grow up to be as healthy as possible.

Making healthy food and exercise part of family life is the right place to start, and will be good for many adults too. Teaching good habits to children early can have lifelong consequences, and someday our children--and grandchildren--will thank us.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

## Rally the Base, Broaden the Appeal

Obama must reset his presidency

BY DR. RON DANIELS

The passage of the historic health insurance reform legislation creates a major opportunity for President Obama to go on the offensive



with bold leadership and a strong people-oriented economic, job generating agenda.

To effectively expand this momentum, however, Obama needs to focus on the economy and jobs. He must tap into the anger and frustration that is currently being exploited by the Tea Party movement and channel the rage in a righteous direction.

This is where President Obama and his team confound me. Rather than directly focusing on the economy and jobs, the President recently announced initiatives to encourage the construction of more nuclear power plants and a limited expansion of off-shore drilling for oil. While these programs may have some job generating effects, they

seem calculated to insulate the President from criticism from the Republicans/conservatives.

The talking heads on the Sunday network shows suggested that Obama is moving to the center to broaden his appeal. The last time I looked, the Republicans/conservatives/Tea Party activists were in no mood to accommodate President Obama on any level. They have their eyes set on the prize, and they are willing to stonewall/obstruct his agenda and misinform/confuse the public in order to retake the House and Senate in the mid-term elections and recapture the White House in 2012. The Republicans/conservatives are determined to make Obama a one-term President.

If the debate over health care taught the President and the Democrats anything, it is that bi-partisanship with the Grande Obstructionist Party (GOP) is not possible as long as Obama and his party are perceived as disoriented and weak.

As the election nears, there is no rational reason to believe the Republican/conservatives will change their

ways. They smell blood and they intend to win big time in November. The President and the Democrats must be equally committed to repulsing the assault by using their majority in both houses to generate as much tangible progress as possible on the economy and jobs.

A place to begin in terms of harnessing and rechanneling the rage is with legislation to regulate the financial institutions on Wall Street. Just as Obama hammered the big insurance companies for their unconscionable rate increases as a way of galvanizing support for final passage of the health insurance reform bill, he must also relentlessly remind the American people that it was the reckless behavior of the bandits on Wall Street that is responsible for the pain they now feel.

Wall Street wrecked Main Street. Therefore, tough, consumer friendly legislation is imperative to ensure that the Barracudas are reined in and are never permitted to do harm to working families, the middle class and the poor ever again. The Tea Party political illiterates must not be allowed to continue to divert atten-

tion away from the real villains who ruined the economy, precipitating massive unemployment.

Most importantly, this righteous populist message must be coupled with the kind of large scale jobs program advocated by the National Urban League in its recent State of Black America Report -- an additional \$100 million program that would target high unemployment areas and also provide hundreds of thousands of jobs for young people this summer.

In addition, the President and Democrats must do everything possible to relieve the pain of homeowners whose mortgages are "underwater" due to the fraudulent sub-prime lending fiasco or because breadwinners have lost their jobs.

This is the kind of bold leadership which is required if the President and the Democrats are to avert the "slaughter" pundits forecast for the mid-term elections.

Dr. Ron Daniels is president of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century and Distinguished Lecturer at York College City University.



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